Sword Art Online SS – Sister's Prayer

She remembered well the day she first connected to the Medicuboid's prototype number one.

Prototype number one was a misshapen machine that comprised of the already commercialized gel bed and a headgear; tens of cables in a variety of colors drooped onto the floor from it and there were an extensive array of monitoring equipment around it. Not even its official codename was decided upon yet and it was called «MFT1», an acronym obtained from «Medical Full-dive Tester One».

Perhaps due to the «SAO Incident» that occurred three months ago and was still unresolved, she felt slight fear as she lay down on the bed. But thanks to Aiko, her elder sister, holding onto her hand beside her and the promise, "It's definitely safe and it won't hurt either," from Doctor Kurahashi, she awaited that instant while enduring her unease.

The machine that looked like a large helmet lowered, passed over her head, and covered her entire face. Shutting her eyelids, she gripped her elder sister's hand tight.

[It will be okay, Yuu.]

She heard her soft voice and felt her firmly returning the grip through her left hand. A strange humming noise grew louder; the sensation of her elder sister's hand and the tension of the gel bed went off into the distance. Eventually, a rainbow-colored light spread out before her eyes despite her shut eyelids—that was when Konno Yuuki descended into her new body in that alternate world, the VR world.

That was a year and three months after she was infected with AIDS by multidrug-resistant HIV—nine months after she turned twelve *.

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"Eh…!"

Yuuki, dozing off on the hill's slope, leapt up in surprise at the sudden scream from Aiko Ran.

"What happened, nee-chan?"

"Ah… sorry for waking you up, Yuu. The article on this news site was a just a little surprising and…"

What her elder sister was holding in her left hand was a translucent, thin panel that seemed embedded in a silver frame carved from crystal. It was an information terminal object for browsing the external internet from the VR hospice, «Serene Garden», we dived in.

"What, what is it, what article?"

Despite the slight hesitation Ran displayed, she still offered the crystal panel to Yuuki who reached her body over.

The moment she read the headlines for the top news, dated 11th May 2024, Yuuki, too, shouted out an "eehh" in surprise. The large words written there were, "National Police Agency, Considering Simultaneous Rescue of SAO Incident Victims".

It had been a quick year and a half since that major incident, the first and likely the last on that scale, where approximately ten thousand game players were imprisoned in a virtual world. Though the higher-ups in the government considered various rescue methods via software, they were forced to watch on passively without any answer to when they could disable the myriad of traps set by the mastermind—or so she thought.

"But rescuing them all at the same time…?"

Yuuki read on through the article's text as she murmured. Though she was not enrolled into middle school, the newspaper article proved to be of no trouble as she did continue her studies in the virtual world and liked books in the first place.

"Let's see… the National Police Agency appear to be investigating into physically breaking the Nerve Gears worn by the seven thousand survivors of the SAO incident…?"

After dictating to that point, she let out another "eeh".

Shifting her sight from the crystal panel to her elder sister, Yuuki asked.

"But didn't the criminal say he would release the electricity if any attempts were made to break the Nerve Gear?"

"Not electricity, but radio waves."

Gloom clouded Ran's features after she corrected in a tone similar to that of a teacher.

"From what I gather in this article, if the battery were to be destroyed in an instant from the outside, there won't be radio waves strong enough to damage the wearer's brain… or so it seems, but…"

"Hmm…"

Yuuki stared hard at the reference photo of a Nerve Gear accompanying the article. The unrefined headgear used in the Medicuboid's prototype number one was modelled on the Nerve Gear, so there was a close resemblance.

Despite how prototype number two, the one she now worn, no, **was in**, differed significantly in both shape and size, she still felt a chill at the «destruction of the VR headgear while worn on the user's head» as she voiced out another question.

"…I wonder how they would actually destroy it in an instant. They couldn't possibly blow it up or smash it with a hammer, right?"

"True… I guess they would probably open a hole in the shell with a precise drill and sever the wiring on the cathode? Though with that man as the mastermind, it's not out of the question there may be some sort of backup circuit secretly created in there."

"O-Ohh…"

"Besides, there was a line in the criminal's statement about how he could not ensure the other players' safety if there were any attempts at breaking the Nerve Gear to free the players if I recall correctly. In other words, to realize this strategy, all seven thousand Nerve Gear units would need to have their circuits severed without even a second's difference. I wonder if that's possible?"

"…T-That sounds hard."

Despite managing that reply, her elder sister's words had long exceeded Yuuki's realm of understanding.

That would have been where she stop thinking and conclude that her elder sister was amazing usually, but Yuuki dropped her sight back onto the crystal panel. It seemed there were several victims from the SAO incident admitted to the hospital where the two were, denying her from turning a blind eye to it.

"…Ran nee-chan, just why did that man called Kayaba do all that?"

Rather than giving an immediate reply, Ran looked in front at Yuuki's murmurs. Yuuki raised her face as well and gazed towards the blue, hazy mountain ridges in the distance.

The area the pair sat side-by-side in is named, «Teal Hills», and extends throughout the eastern sector of the vast Serene Garden. The knolls, topped with green, leading to one another with gentle slopes along with the blue lakes and small villages dotted between them created a sight of such beauty that one could gaze on forever.

Published in September 2023, Serene Garden is a VR hospice, or a VR world meant for palliative care of the terminally ill in other words, that focuses most of its development resources on the «beauty of the world». Unlike the titles launched for the AmuSphere in June that year, mainly classified as adventure or FPS, Serene Garden had absolutely no combat aspect but allowed one to experience a multitude of landscapes with minute differences. On the vast world map, there were green hills in the

eastern part, snow fields in the north, towering mountains in the west, deep forests in the west, and the central assigned to the capital, streets with a European feel to them; a sightseeing trip around the world on foot would likely take a whole week.

Yuuki and Ran's parents passed away in succession at the end of the previous year. Though the direct cause for their deaths was pneumonia, they suffered from various other opportunistic infections and were rendered asleep throughout the day near the end of autumn due to the strong painkillers prescribed to mitigate their pain.

There was once when their parents visited Serene Garden via the AmuSphere.

They spent only a single hour together as the AmuSphere's ability to cancel bodily sensations could not completely erase the pain from their illnesses. Still, the time they spent slowly strolling through the town plaza and the meadows on the outskirts was engraved into Yuuki's and Ran's chests as irreplaceable memories. Their father mentioned time after time about how delicious the boxed lunch they had made was as he ate and their mother sang many of the nursery rhymes and hymns the sisters loved while teary-eyed at the beauty of the scenery.

It would have never been possible without full-dive technology and VR worlds.

And the one who independently developed most of that technology was the man, Kayaba Akihiko, as known as the culprit behind the SAO incident.

It was not just those memories with their parents. Though the Medicuboid prototype Yuuki connected to as a test subject was mainly developed under the supervision of a medical equipment manufacturer, Ran dived into Serene Garden with a Nerve Gear with the modifications of a smaller battery capacity and a limiter inserted. Hence, it was thanks to that worst criminal of the century that the pair were able to touch each other in the virtual world.

As though to relieve those complicated emotions from Yuuki, Ran raised her left hand and gently rubbed Yuuki's back.

"I don't understand that either. But there's no need for you to worry about that, Yuu. You are only helping out in the Medicuboid's development as a tester for the sake of the many patients it'll help out someday."

"……Yeah…"

Nodding, Yuuki lightly leaned against her elder sister's shoulder.

Though she was older, Ran—Aiko—was Yuuki's twin sister, born on the same day. Still, as far as she could remember, Yuuki had always been relying on and doted on by her as the little sister, and Ran tenderly shielded and protected her as the elder sister.

Yuuki only got to become a tester for the Medicuboid, too, thanks to her strong insistence for it.

The Medicuboid prototype, a delicate precision equipment, was placed in the biological cleanroom of Yokohama General Hospital Kouhoku where the two were hospitalized. The level of bacteria and viruses inside was far lower than outside. In other words, that meant there was a great drop in the risk of opportunistic infections, what AIDS patients feared most.

If she entered the cleanroom as a tester, it would prolong her length of life. Despite understanding that, Ran conceded the chance to Yuuki. At the current moment, a year and three months since that day, though it was only a little worse, Ran who occupied a normal private ward experienced a quicker deterioration in her medical condition. The Nerve Gear could not possibly erase the fear Ran must be feeling now.

Though she could have told Doctor Kurahashi, "I'm okay, let my older sister in," when he suggested entering the cleanroom as a Medicuboid tester, Yuuki did not. However, Ran spoke out for her without even a moment of hesitation. "Let Yuu do it," she said.

Ran abruptly jumped up just as Yuuki chewed hard on her lips.

She stretched vigorously as her long hair fluttered in the breeze. The pair's avatars were automatically generated by the system based on their photos, but Ran's avatar was astonishingly close to her real appearance and really suited the girlish shirt dress on her.

With a smile and a hand extended towards Yuuki, she cheerfully spoke.

"Here, Yuu, let's go pick some herbs. I get the feeling we'll find some of those super rare ones today."

"……Yeah!"

Nodding, Yuuki firmly caught onto her elder sister's hand.

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Though it lacked any combat elements, there is more to do in Serene Garden besides sightseeing.

The most advanced game element is «housing». The users are given plots of land of a fixed size in the world's capital, «Serenity», where they can build a house to their liking. That said, only various tints of bricks that suit the townscape are allowed for the exterior walls, so the main entertainment in building the house comes from the interior.

Materials and furniture or interior design can be bought off the shelf or ordered from the NPC shops in the streets, but points named, «curren», are necessary for that. Though it seems to be short for *currency*, it cannot be transferred to others and the only way to save it up is to «harvest». By gathering harvestable plants and minerals, catching insects, all which spawn in various locations on the world map, and bringing them to the shops in the streets, they can be exchanged for curren according to their rarities. There are surprisingly many options aside from that, like creating all sorts of items straight from materials or participating in the tournament, «Bug Battle», with the insects one caught and raised.

Yuuki and Ran shared a house on the higher parts of Serenity and despite customizing it over the half year, it was still far from complete. Though they were currently saving up points for a large Russian stove to be placed in the living room, it took them long enough to even reach the seventy percent mark they were at.

But then again, it was no real trouble as harvesting was surprisingly fun. An hour or two or picking herbs would pass in an instant while engrossed in the view of the beautiful fields. The harvesting feature was popular with the users of Serene Garden as it granted them a good, long reprieve from the dread of battling against the stress of wondering «how long they had to live» which they all suffered from, without exception. Even somebody like that grandmother who was close to Yuuki could run all about the world map for the entire day, gathering a mountain load of materials to build up her four-story mansion in the most affluent district of Serenity Town.

Though they would not go to such lengths, their dear wish to roast sweet potatoes with that stove would only be granted if they kept at it without slacking off for even a single day.

Having moved to their secret gathering spot by the side of a small pond from the sloping hill where they were basking in the sun, Yuuki was absorbed in picking herbs with a basket in her hand—

"…Ah."

—before she raised her face at her elder sister's voice.

"What is it, nee-chan?"

She asked her elder sister who was a short distance away and shut her mouth after seeing her gesture to "stay quiet". Though she traced the line of sight, starting from Ran who was frozen in a half-rising posture, she could not be sure of what she had spotted.

Leaving behind the basket and proceeding on stealthily on tiptoes, Yuuki cautiously moved to her elder sister's side and focused her eyes beyond the clumps of grass—

"…Ah."

—before she unconsciously let out a soft voice as well.

A stag beetle with a profound blue luster stayed still on the aged broadleaf tree's trunk by the pond. It likely measured close to ten centimeters. Yuuki recognized those two magnificent jaws in addition to that long horn extending from behind its head from the Serene Garden Insect Encyclopedia.

"Don't you think that stag beetle looks pretty rare?"

And towards her elder sister's words—

"It's not just rare. That's the Royal Triton Stag Beetle."

—she immediately answered and a voice, filled with mostly agitation and just a little aversion, replied.

"I didn't think you would remember even its name."

"But you see, it's the strongest among the stag beetles if you raise it well!"

"…You had an interest in Bug Battle, Yuu?"

"A-Actually, I like it quite a lot."

The blue stag beetle slowly climbed up the old tree's trunk even as they exchanged whispers. Golden sap oozed out ahead in its path, its presumed aim.

"Nee-chan, you got a net?"

"I didn't think we would be doing anything but picking herbs, so no, I don't."

"Me too…"

The inventory prepared for Serene Garden's users was relatively small and the need to bring back raw material items gathered over several

hours meant anything unnecessary should not be brought along. And to add to that, as Yuuki and Ran specialized in harvesting plants, they would go for insects only when they spot some exceedingly rare one.

But it must be said that the Royal Triton Stag Beetle a mere five or six meters away topped the list of rarities and trading it in for points at the bug shop would pay for the large Russian stove with change to boot. They could not possibly let the chance slip.

"Nee-chan, I'll try catching it with my hands."

She whispered and Ran caught her breath, shocked.

"Yuu… you can touch that barehanded?"

"……"

—Now that I think about it, nee-chan's completely useless against bugs in the real world, just like mama. They were both screaming while running everywhere that time I caught and brought back that grasshopper from the garden, weren't they?

She quickly replied with nostalgia from those young memories.

"It's perfectly fine, the bugs in this world don't bite, sting, or spit out any weird fluid. Wait here, okay?"

She lightly pat Ran's shoulder, slipped her sandals off, and began her advance while stooped over.

Though she kept it a secret from Ran, she actually went hunting for bugs quite a bit on her own. The first ironclad rule when aiming for a rare insect is to be patient. The second is to approach from its back. The third is to make no strange noises.

She could not avoid making noise, scrapping against the grass, due to moving through the grass higher than her knees. She slowly made her way forward while mixing those sounds into the swaying of the grass in the wind.

The super rare stag beetle climbing the trunk stopped once it reached where the golden sap oozed from. Though its feeding time was the best chance for capture, Yuuki's experience told her that period of time was exceeding short for rare insects. It would spread its wings in roughly fifteen seconds and shoot off.

There were three meters until the tree. She would never make it by continuing to move with the wind. That said, running recklessly would create a great noise and definitely make the stag beetle flee.

—What now? I'll need to move without touching the grass somehow…

Something caught Yuuki's eyes after she swung her sight left and right. Wooden posts spaced roughly a meter from each other beside the pond on her immediate right. They were taller than the clumps of grass at their tip and she might be able to move without making any noise atop them.

The problem was that the posts measured no more than five centimeters at their diameters. If she were to lose her balance the slightest bit, she would fall head first into the grassy clump on the left or the pond on the right. Not to mention how she had no time to cautiously take each step, maintaining her balance.

"…No two ways about it!"

Telling herself so in her mouth, she moved to her side timed with the next breeze. She stood up with opportune timing and threw herself onto one of the narrow posts.

—Ready, set!

Gathering her strength without letting out her voice, she silently jumped from post to post. The moment she reached the post closest to the tree without tumbling off somehow, the stag beetle's forewings with its gem-like luster spread out along with its hindwings as it finished feeding.

Bunn! She turned her eyes towards the buzz made by the stag beetle as it took off.

"Toryaa!"

Hiding her voice no longer, Yuuki put all of her strength into a jump. The fingertips of her right hand, stretched out as far as they could, cleanly clutched onto the stag beetle's long top horn.

A powerful, large rhinoceros beetle in the real world would not give up with simply its back caught, but this was a virtual world that focused on usability. The rousing sound effect when a rare insect was caught rang out and stag beetle kept its wings and calmed down.

She landed onto the grassy clumps with a rustle—

"Alrightttt—! I got the Royal Triton Stag Beetle!"

—and her left fist shot up before Ran approached with a face filled eighty percent with surprise and the rest with fear.

"…T-that was amazing, Yuu. I can't believe you really caught it with your bare hands."

"Nihihi, I'm surprised too. Here, want to try holding it, nee-chan?"

Ran shook her head with a serious expression while backing off the instant she held out the giant stag beetle in her right hand.

"I-I will refrain. But really, congratulations, Yuuki. What will you do with that stag beetle? Are you going to sell it? Or raise it?"

"Nn… nnn~~~~"

She brought the docile blue stag beetle she continued gripping by the horn before her eyes while groaning. Though she thought only of exchanging it for points when she was aiming for it, it was her first time obtaining an item this rare over the half year she spent harvesting in Serene Garden. Not to mention how she found those big and round black compound eyes all the more adorable the closer she looked into its face.

Nevertheless, raising an insect in this world incurred various expenses as well, such as for its feed. It would pay for its own food at least if it won in the Bug Battle tournament, but no matter how much she loved watching it, she would have to face various obstacles to take part in it herself.

"What should I do…"

With her face still facing the stag beetle whose jaw was wriggling, Yuuki briefly pondered. It was then that—

"Aaaaah——!"

A deafening scream surged in from her left, knocking her over towards the right.

"W-What!?"

Turning to her left with Ran who shouted, she saw a girl had apparently closed in without either of them noticing. Of course, it was an avatar, but as Serene Garden did not allow for gender changes and one's appearance was generated from one's actual photo, it could be thought to resemble the player in the real world.

Sporting long green hair done up in a ponytail (quite naturally, one's hairstyle and color could be freely customized), a tawny camo patterned T-shirt, and cargo pants with many pockets, the girl who was the very image of a bug hunter shook the long bug catching net in her left hand while thrusting her right index finger straight at Yuuki.

"That! That Royton! That's the one I was chasing this whole hour!"

After taking three seconds to figure out that «Royton» referred to neither dishes made from pork nor those floating bits in soup * but the Royal Triton Stag Beetle, Yuuki hid the stag beetle in her right hand behind herself while retorting.

"I-I was the one who caught it."

By Serene Garden's rules, harvest items belonged to the one who first got it, be it grass, rocks, or bugs, and claims like, "this spot is mine," or "I saw that first," were futile. The camo shirt girl who likely knew that too turned silent with her lips pursed for a moment, but opened her mouth to speak again right after.

"But you don't look like you're a bug hunter? You don't even have a cage, how are you going to bring it back?"

Yuuki became the one at a loss for words this time.

True enough, caught insects could not be stored in one's inventory without putting them into a specialized cage like the one fixed on the girl's waist. Having said that, they would gradually grow weaker if simply held in one's hands. They would soon recover when placed in a cage and given food and water, but it would take twenty minutes to get to the nearest village from here even if they hurried. She did not know how many life points the stag beetle would lose in the process and there would be no end to her regrets on the off chance she got it killed. The greatest reason why Yuuki did not participated in Bug Battle was due to her fear of losing a cherished insect in some unexpected accident.

Ran gently placed her hand onto the silenced Yuuki's left shoulder. As she spoke.

"…Yuu."

Yuuki understood what her elder sister wanted to say with just that. Moving the Royal Triton Stag Beetle she was hiding behind back in front of her face, she bid it farewell in her heart and extended it out towards the bug hunter girl.

"Okay. I'll let you have it."

The ponytailed girl's eyes turned round with surprise then.

"Eh… I-I can have it?"

"Weren't you the one who wanted that?"

She stepped forward with a bitter smile, but the girl looked down at herself, more flustered than before.

"B-But I don't have anything worth enough to trade for that Royton …"

Players cannot trade among themselves in Serene Garden through curren. Though bartering was possible with materialized items, there was likely no one walking around with enough on hand for an insect of the rarest grade.

Yuuki showed a smile as she spoke.

"Not as a trade. This child would be better off raised by someone hunting bugs seriously like you too."

"……"

However, the girl made no attempt to speak, looking so dejected that her earlier vigor seemed like a lie. She probably wanted to let out her frustration at how the stag beetle she chased after was caught by another, but never really hoped that it would be conceded to her.

Despite guessing that much, Yuuki had no idea what to say to her, and Ran threw out a proposal in a calming voice.

"Then, how about we call it a trade and let Yuu name that child?"

The girl immediately beamed and nodded endlessly.

"Y-Yeah, of course, sure! You name it!"

"Eh… me?"

She panicked inside while responding. Honestly, she had absolutely no confidence in her naming sense. Her avatar name in Serene Garden, too, was «Yuuki», exactly how her real name was pronounced, unlike her sister who chose an alternate reading of *ai*, «Ran».

Still, she would be making a real mess out of everything if she gave up here, so she put her all into thinking. The name she came up with after over ten whole seconds was—

"…Erm… then, how about «Roy»…?"

—You didn't change a thing!

Despite how she braced herself for that retort, the ponytailed girl nodded with a broad smile.

"That sounds good, I like simple names like that too! I'll register this child as «Roy», then!"

"Yeah!"

Nodding, Yuuki bid farewell in her heart to the stag beetle with a "stay healthy" and held it out to the girl once more.

Cupping it with both hands, the girl seemed overcome with emotion and gazed at the royal blue luster for a while, but eventually transferred it to the insect cage on her waist with careful motions. Following that, she opened a window and stored the cage into her inventory. The stag beetle's life points should be maintained with that.

Upon picking up the bug catching net left on the ground and placing it into her inventory as well, the girl straightened her posture and bowed down deeply.

"—Thank you very much for letting me have it! I had been looking for that bug ever since I came here, so I'm really, really happy!"

Noticing the word, «here», referred not to Teal Hills but to Serene Garden, this VR hospice, Yuuki carelessly asked.

"How long has it been since you came here?"

"I've been here since right after it was released, so I guess it's already been eight months… ah, I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself, have I? How do you do, I'm Merida. Nice to meet you!"

Yuuki gave her name as well while shaking hands with Merida who extended her right hand with a bright smile.

"I'm Yuuki! Nice to meet you!"

Following that, Ran grasped Merida's hand too.

"I'm Ran, Yuuki's older sister. Nice to meet you, Merida-san."

"You can just call me Merida. I'm probably only a little older than the two of you. I'm glad I met the both of you, let's be good friends… from……"

Merida's voice trembled and cut off without warning.

The green ponytail wavered as her body gradually slumped over and was frantically propped up by Yuuki with both hands.

Merida soon recovered after shifting her to the tree where the stag beetle, now «Roy», had stopped and sitting her down on the grass under its shade.

She blinked several times before noticing Yuuki and Ran peeking at her with concern and lowered her head, seemingly abashed.

"…I apologize, it looks like I got a little too excited over you letting me have Roy."

Though Yuuki smiled, going along with Merida who laughed with a *tehehe*, she could not help but worry.

The users in Serene Garden are never officially called «players» and the users tend to avoid saying that word among themselves. After all, none of them were in this world simply for the sake of playing.

The purpose of a VR hospice is palliative care—to ease the pain and suffering from illness and provide an improvement in one's quality of life—and its users all suffer from severe illnesses without exception. In the first place, it is impossible to even register an account without being admitted to some medical facility serving as an intermediary. In other words, Merida had to be diving into this world from some hospital in Japan.

She did not know what Merida suffered from. However, her avatar collapsing in the VR world indicated that it was no mere giddiness or

anemia but some condition related to her brain that the AmuSphere was connected to.

Of course, the AmuSphere would automatically disconnect and her avatar would vanish if the situation turned critical. As she regained consciousness soon after like this, it should be as Merida said: a state that did not require immediate attention. But on the other hand, Merida's calmness made Yuuki's worries grow. She was used to this happening… that was to say, this occurred frequently.

As though she sensed Yuuki's inner thoughts through the hand supporting her back, Merida laughed once again.

"Aha, really, I'm fine. I'll recover right away if I stay still for a little… see, I'm totally fine now."

Lifting her upper body with vigor, she hopped to her feet with the momentum. Her smooth movements could be said to be only natural for a player who started at the very beginning. However, on that train of thought, if she participated in Serene Garden since it was first out, that was also an indication that her condition required palliative care for that long.

Yuuki stood as well while concerned over Merida's condition. When she did, Merida took a step back and concentrated her gaze on her once again.

"What… what is it?"

Though Yuuki lowered her head, thinking about how the cute one piece dress she wore, matching her sister's, did look wrong on her after all, Merida spoke with a carefree smile.

"My bad, I apologize for staring like that. Though that one piece's really cute, it doesn't suit bug hunting at all, so I was wondering how you actually caught a Royal Triton Stag Beetle. That stag beetle would have fled if it heard any footsteps, how did you move through the grass with it on?"

"Erm…"

Yuuki tilted her head, trying to recall, before Ran answered with a giggle.

"Yuu didn't move through the grass, but jumped across those posts at the side of the pond. She was bouncing from one to another."

"Ah, so that was how."

Yuuki laughed, embarrassed over forgetting what she had done just tens of minutes ago, but on the hand, Merida wiped her smile off and shouted out an "eeh".

"On top of those narrow posts!? You can do that, Yuuki-chan!?"

"Y-Yeah, well. Also, go ahead and call me Yuuki!"

"T-Then, Yuuki… can you try standing on one leg?"

"Eh? Okay…"

Unsure of Merida's aim, Yuuki blankly bent her left leg as told and stood only on her right leg. She talked to Merida while maintaining her balance with lightly outspread arms.

"There isn't anything like muscles tiring out in this world, so I can stay on a single leg forever. You too, right, Nee-chan?"

"I-I wonder… I've never really tried, so…"

Ran, too, stood up on a single leg despite her expression showing her lack of confidence. Though she wobbled slightly at the start, her body stabilized soon enough.

Before they were forced to transfer in their fourth year of elementary school, both Yuuki and Ran attended physical education classes in school as one normally would. Their growth were similar as expected of twins, but Ran was always slightly ahead, be it in running, ball games,

or even test results for that matter, and Yuuki secretly felt vexed over that.

I'll show you I'm better at standing on one leg in the virtual world at least! Yuuki steeled her determination in her mind as she maintained her balance, but Merida suddenly started clapping and called out just after a mere minute passed.

"You are both amazing, Yuuki, Ran! This is the first time I saw anyone stand on one leg for this long over here!"

The both of them gave vacant looks at those words that seemed somewhat exaggerated and Merida clasped her hands together with some bitterness.

"You could have been one super bug hunter with a FC score that high! Hey, it's not too late, wouldn't you switch class to become a hunter now!? I'll teach you everything about being one!"

Still on one leg, Ran raised both hands with a "calm down" towards Merida, who droned on and on, and asked meekly.

"Merida, in the first place, what is FC?"

"I've never heard of it either."

Before the pair tilting their heads in sync, Merida took a long, deep breath as though calming herself down before beginning her explanation.

"I'm sorry, I got ahead of myself… it's a habit. Erm, FC refers to *Full-dive Conformation*… or in other words, the compatibility with virtual worlds, and the easiest test for it is to stand on one leg. There are subtle differences in the sense of balance and weight of gravity over here, so balancing on one leg for long periods of time is difficult without being able to adjust to that. My dive time should be on the longer side, but forty seconds or so is still my limit, I guess?"

"S-So that was it…"

Somewhat shocked at how much Merida knew regarding full-dive technology, Yuuki looked down at her right foot on the ground. She certainly recalled being disorientated at the difference in sensations compared to the real world from when she first used prototype number one, but got used to it straight away after jumping and bouncing around the vivid virtual world in her excitement. She did not remember Ran mentioning anything around a difference in sensations either.

"…That means FC depends on the individual?"

Yuuki offhandedly asked and Merida nodded with a somber expression.

"That's right. It's rare, but I heard there were some judged as FNC… *Full-dive Not Conformed* on the initial connection test. It must have been a shock to be told that after buying that expensive Ner… AmuSphere, don't you think? Well, there are more shops nowadays that allow testing before purchase, though."

"Hmm…"

Yuuki felt a tinge of guilt even while relieved that neither her elder sister nor herself were FNC. Ran's modified Nerve Gear and naturally, the Medicuboid prototype number two she now used were prepared by the hospital. Though Doctor Kurahashi had said that this was nothing in light of how the two of them had contracted their diseases, she could not help but ponder whenever she interacted with other players in Serene Garden. About how they would have never been able to get here if they had to buy two of those expensive AmuSpheres.

Yes—her elder sister had her good reflexes, but she believed that she was able to stand on a leg for minutes like this only thanks to the Medicuboid and its significantly higher specifications than the AmuSphere.

Yuuki felt pain at how she was competing with Ran the moment that thought popped into her head and lowered her left foot down towards the ground.

But right before she could—

"Aah, no more!"

—Ran grabbed onto her from the right with that shout and she was forced to kneel onto the grass.

"Wah, what was that for, nee-chan!"

"You were the one who hit the ground first, Yuu, so I won our standing on one leg contest!"

"Ugh, that's not fair! I wasn't anywhere near done!"

Cheerful laughter came from Merida as she forgot her hesitance from seconds ago and retorted.

"Ahaha, the two of you sure are close. It must be nice, wish I had an older or younger sister too…"

Her smile quickly slid off after she got to that point and sank into silence. She must have thought about what it meant for both sisters to participate in a VR hospice.

Taking over from Yuuki who could not immediately get out the words telling her to not worry, Ran spoke in a cheerful tone.

"I'm sure you would have been a great older sister, Merida. You're cool and even so knowledgeable too."

Standing up, she continued while pulling Yuuki up.

"It sounds like you know a lot about full-dive games, but do you play other games aside from Serene Garden too?"

"Nn, I'm mainly on SereGa now, I guess. I'm busy enough just hunting and raising bugs."

She replied with her smile back on, but it appeared slightly gloomy.

"I was on another game before SereGa… But my illness was detected right before the official release, you see, and I couldn't make it for that."

"Ooh, what game?"

Yuuki asked with keen interest, not knowing about other VR worlds, and Merida showed a smile that appeared enshrouded in sadness while replying with a different question.

"Do the two of you have anything on from now?"

"Erm…"

She glanced over to the time display at the bottom-right of her vision and saw it was three-thirty. There was still a while until dinner at six and neither of them had any appointments arranged for inspection or consultation today.

"We should be okay for another two hours or so."

Yuuki replied and the bug hunter girl gave a curt nod.

"Then how about we continue this over tea in the village?"

3

Aside from the capital, Serenity, each region in the four cardinal points of the world of Serene Garden has their respective town or village. A teleport gate is set up in the middle of the village, «Roite», at the eastern region, Teal Hills, and it allows instantaneous transportation to the capital.

Merida spun around the moment she passed through the village gate ahead of Yuuki and Ran.

"Which do the both of you like more, crepes or ice cream?"

Calls of "Crepes!" immediately flew back in perfect synchronization, making Merida widen her eyes.

"T-That was quick."

"Ehehe."

She exchanged glances with her elder sister as she replied. Their deceased mother especially excelled at making crepes among all her snacks. They loved her crepes so much, they could eat them every day, whether it was the crêpes sucrées with that light brown, mildly burnt batter filled with cream and fruits, the salty crêpes salées wrapped around cheese and ham, or even the crêpes Suzette with its batter folded and drench in a warm, orange-flavored sauce.

She did get to eat those reasonably tasty, though not up to her mother's standard, crepes from the hospital's cafeteria for a while even after she was admitted, but she was torn from those, too, ever since she entered the cleanroom.

Ran, on the other hand, ate normal hospital fare and could go to the cafeteria. However, she seemed to have decided to have crepes only in the virtual world when with Yuuki. She once told her to not mind her and to go ahead and eat them in the real world too, to which she replied with, "they don't taste good on my own".

Merida might have felt something despite absolutely oblivious to those circumstances as she firmly nodded before thumping her chest covered in that camo patterned shirt.

"Alright, I'll bring you to a shop with the best crepes you'll ever find!"

"Eh… there was a shop like that in this village aside from the restaurant at the plaza?"

Merida simply grinned at Ran's question and walked off.

Roite Village was built atop low hills. Gazing at the brick houses creating a vague resemblance to those mountain villages in the Alps, they climbed the stone paved main street. Serene Garden has approximately a thousand concurrent users connecting at any one time at most and considering the number of patients in hospices across the country is over thirty thousand, there was not much hope for it to gain in popularity, but as there were only five towns or villages for the entire

world, there were surprisingly many players passing through the main street.

However, Merida left the main street where many shops gather and stepped into the labyrinthine back streets before continuing down turns, towards both the right and left, with brisk steps.

Walking through those without getting lost in Serene Garden, which did not have a detailed map function, required not just a complete understanding of the intricate landscape that made up Roite Village but also a familiarity with virtual worlds. She walked on even while her curiosity over the game Merida had played before Serene Garden grew once more, and just as she lost track of where exactly they were, the view suddenly opened up before her eyes.

A small semicircular terrace jutted out on the western slope of a hill and an entire strip of grassland could be seen gleaming brightly in the afternoon sunlight. The light blue stretching out into the distance was a coastline in the form of a fjord: the end of the world.

A single table with a parasol mounted on it was placed on the terrace and a sweet fragrance drifted in from the modest cafe further in.

"Lucky us, the table outside's free!"

Turning back with a smile, Merida circled around the pair, pushed them forward, and had them sit on the chairs that offered a view of the grasslands. Sitting on the opposite side herself, she pushed the menu atop the table towards them.

"This is my favorite shop in Roite Village. It's my treat today, so order whatever you want!"

Yuuki and Ran, who both had their sight stuck on the scenery before their eyes, turned back simultaneously and shook their heads.

"We couldn't possibly, how can we let you treat us after introducing us to such a lovely shop…?"

Merida stopped Ran who got up to her feet in a fluster with a single hand gesture.

"What are you on about, the crepes here won't even begin to cover what that Royal Triton Stag Beetle is worth. Let me do that much at least!"

"…Then, if you insist."

Yuuki had already focused her sight towards the menu made from cork by the time Ran sat back down.

There was naturally no limit to the refrigerator's capacity in a virtual world, but still, the number of lines of text was ridiculous. According to the ordering instructions, they were apparently free to choose from five variants of batter, ten variants of creams, twenty variants of fruits, thirty variants of sauces, and fifty variants of toppings. In other words, there was practically no limit to the number of combinations too.

"Amazing… but I can't decide if there are this many…"

Yuuki let out that miserable cry immediately before Ran cheerfully recited on and on.

"Then I'll have the «Juicy Honey» batter, «Milky Whip» cream, «Ruby Strawberry» and «Refreshing Mandarin» for the fruits, «Syrupy Chocolate» for the sauce, and «Fresh Pistachio» with «Caramel Crunch» for the toppings!"

"……"

She gazed at her elder sister who tapped on the touchpad menu time after time in a daze. Merida, too, widened her eyes on the opposite side. She was no match for her elder sister in many things, but that proved especially so in terms of decisiveness. Yuuki rarely ever witnessed Ran brooding over anything.

Having finished her choices, Ran raised her face and spoke.

"What about you, Yuu?"

"…I'll match yours, nee-chan."

Upon raising the white flag and jumping on the bandwagon, Merida continued with a "then me too!" as well.

Nodding, Ran inputted 3 in the quantity.

"Then we'll be glad to take you up on your offer."

And she handed the menu over. Receiving it, Merida pressed the order button and paid the curren needed for three before a NPC waitress carried over three plates out from the shop a mere ten seconds later.

The crepes atop of them were in that same, familiar, triangular form, but much larger than expected. Cream and fruits extravagantly burst out from the pale-yellow batter as the sauce and toppings glittered.

"Woah, it looks so good!"

Shouting so, Yuuki held her hands before her chest and recited a simplified prayer before lifting the crepe up with both hands. It would have been next to impossible to eat something like that in the real world without it breaking apart, but the cream and fruits spilling out and plopping onto her clothes… would not happen here as long as she did not intentionally let it drop from her hands.

"Thanks for the food!"

Speaking in chorus with Ran, she opened up her mouth as large as it could go and bit in. The moist, thin crepe tore apart satisfyingly while the fluffy, airy cream and chunks of strawberries leapt from within.

She had experienced unease towards eating food composed from data back when she just arrived in this world, but got used to that before long as well. Though there was a certain knack needed before she could bite and taste like in the real world, as long as she shut her eyes and bit down with a certain amount of strength while keeping her tongue mostly fixed in place, she would not feel much of a «difference in sensation».

Yuuki felt the batter, cream, and strawberries melting together in her mouth, slipping through her throat, and disappearing before she shouted out as her eyes flashed open.

"Merida, this crepe is suuu… per tasty! It's completely different from the shop at the teleport gate plaza!"

Her newly-made friend reacted with a delighted smile from the bottom of her heart.

"I know, right?! I think they must have placed this here where there aren't many around because the amount of data needed's larger. It was a real pain learning how to come here without getting lost after I first found this shop, you know? …What about you, Ran? You like it?"

Faced with that question, Ran raised her face from the crepe she had already taken three mouthfuls from and gave a deep nod.

"I've decided. I will come back here until I've conquered every crepe possible."

"Ah-haha, that sounds tough, but go for it! I haven't even managed to try half of them after frequenting this place for a whole half year."

"We'll count on you to tell us which combinations are the best next time, then."

Yuuki continued munching away at her large crepe as well while listening to the pair's conversation.

The crepe was, unfortunately, delicious but not to the level of those her mother had cooked. Those crepes could never be found anywhere on Earth. Still, she felt eating together with this girl who they had just encountered by coincidence and befriended must have amplified the taste data by several times.

Back before the symptoms of her illness appeared—when she was still attending elementary school—she had many close friends. Day after day, she would wait impatiently for lunch time where they would stick their

desks together in the classroom and raise a ruckus while eating their identical meals.

However, that joy vanished the moment a rumor spread out about Yuuki being a HIV carrier. Those classmates who would stick their desks to hers were gone and Yuuki could only spend each day eating her lonely school lunch in a corner of the classroom. None of her favorites tasted any good then, be it pork curry, vermicelli soup, or even milk pudding.

Now that she thought about it, this was the first time she ate with a «friend» ever since she was hospitalized. Even if the crepe she held in her two hands was virtual, even if she did not know her real name or face, even if this was an open-air cafe in another world—the suffocating warmth constricting Yuuki's chest now was real.

"……Yuuki."

It was when Yuuki opened her eyes upon her name suddenly called by Merida that she noticed the tears coming from them as she ate the crepe. Returning what was left onto the plate in a hurry, she wiped her eyes with both hands. But there was just no end to those tears. Ran had told her before that emotions seemed somewhat exaggerated in the virtual world, raising the difficulty of holding back tears.

"I-I'm alright, I'm just… just a little……"

Yuuki rubbed at her eyes even throughout her murmurs and Ran gently pat her on her back from the side. Perhaps all those times being comforted so from when she was still young had conditioned it into a reflex, but she finally managed to stifle her tears with that.

"…Sorry, Merida, for crying all of a sudden like that. The crepe was just too delicious, and I was also really enjoying myself, so…"

She pulled together a smile somehow and Merida, too, showed a smile that seemed like it was keeping something at bay. Throwing the last piece of the crepe into her mouth, she swallowed it and let out a sigh.

"……I often cried to myself until just a little while ago too. No… I still become really depressed whenever I remember. I would feel sad, frustrated, and helpless, and all I would want is to cry and scream like a baby."

Merida pointed her gaze towards the grassy plains in the distance as she quietly spoke. The sun's intensity had grown without their notice and made the vast plains gleam golden.

"…By remember, you mean the game you played before coming to Serene Garden…?"

The deep green ponytail fluttered at Ran's question.

"Yeah. I could only play for a month… not to mention it wasn't the official release, but the beta test, you see. It was August 2022, so that's over a year before SereGa officially began, I guess? I was wearing the Nerve Gear rather than the AmuSphere and became a player in the world's first VRMMO-RPG…"

A brief moment passed before those words pricked Yuuki's consciousness.

The news article Ran showed her before they started picking herbs surfaced at the back of her mind. She softly, coarsely murmured that name.

"…Sword Art Online…?"

Merida had a weak smile on as she nodded faintly but surely.

"Yes. I was in a medium-sized guild in SAO's beta test. It was really fun… The one month test ended in the blink of an eye and everyone vowed to meet again for sure in the official release in November. But they found a tumor in my brain right after that, see. My Nerve Gear got confiscated since I really shouldn't have been playing any games in that state."

"……But, then…"

She must have guessed what Ran's short mutter implied as Merida nodded once more.

"Yeah. Thanks to the tumor, I was spared from being imprisoned in that death game. My parents and the doctors said that I would recover in no time for sure, that the tumor was here to save my life. …But the world isn't that kind, is it? My brain tumor's unreachable through surgery and although I'm still continuing chemotherapy and radiation therapy, it just wouldn't go away. We've been together for a year and a half now."

Merida laughed and traced her fingertips around the temple of her head as though searching inside of it.

Merida had collapsed near the tree where the stag beetle was caught due to a brain illness, after all. That illness, a malignant tumor or more simply, cancer, was no stranger to Yuuki and Ran. The risk of lymphocytes in the blood undergoing a cancerous change increases with the decline in immunity from an AIDS outbreak. Yuuki's and Ran's regular checkups found no tumors as of yet, but not even being contained in a cleanroom was sufficient for defending against cells developing into tumors.

With her hand lowered, Merida leaned against the chair's back and looked up at the skies, a blur of blue and light yellow, as she continued.

"…I could never tell my parents, but I've been thinking about this a little lately. About how if I'm going to die to this tumor, I might as well be shut away in SAO… in Aincrad, fighting along with everyone in the guild…"

"……!"

That took both Yuuki's and Ran's breaths away.

If she recalled correctly, «Aincrad» was where Sword Art Online took place, the name of a gigantic castle floating in the sky. Roughly ten thousand players were imprisoned there at the official launch with the rules, «players cannot log out and their HP reaching zero will cause them to die for real», imposed onto them. The number of casualties had

already exceeded three thousand in the year and a half since. The death count was likely Japan's, no, the world's highest when it came to incidents caused by a single individual.

Why do you wish for such a horrifying game of your own will—she could not pose that question to Merida.

The survival rate for malignant brain tumors should be around thirty percent on average. That meant roughly seventy percent of those diagnosed would pass away within five years. A figure that far exceeded SAO's casualty rate of thirty percent.

"…That's true."

Ran murmured. Turning in surprise, she saw her elder sister's profile with its usual calmness, though with a light slightly stronger than usual in her dark blue eyes.

"I might have thought the same as you if I had experienced Sword Art Online's beta test, Merida. Illness can only be defended against, but monsters can be fought against with our own strength."

Hearing that, Merida widened her two eyes with some bewilderment before dropping her sight towards the empty plate on the table. The plate shone pure white as though the crepe full of cream that was on it was nothing but a lie.

"……Yeah. If I am to quietly die on a hospital bed like this… I would rather choose to jump into SAO and die while fighting for someone else's sake if given the chance this very moment. With that… maybe I'll find a purpose to live…… I figured……"

Translucent tears fell feebly onto the white plate, drop by drop. They glittered beautifully in the sinking sun's light and vanished after their transient lives.

A purpose to live.

Those words tore deep into Yuuki's heart.

She had never told her deceased parents or her elder sister, but she had been constantly pondering over that same subject for a long time now. Why did she live? What meaning was there in her life, bringing anguish to her father and mother, and stress to her teachers and friends in school; a life that would pass away before it matures into an adult.

She still had no answer to that question. She might not find one even in her final moments. However, Yuuki could not nod along to Merida's words. She took in breath after breath, willing the emotions welling up from deep in her chest into words, before Ran's hand gently caressed her back. A shout burst from her mouth in that instant.

"You mustn't… you mustn't, Merida! You can't meet your mother or father anymore if you do that. You mustn't make them sad… I mean… since…"

You can meet them whenever you want. Unlike us.

It seemed those words that did not escape her mouth reached Merida. Lifting her face damp with tears, she stared hard at Yuuki with her big eyes and nodded with her lips forming a faint smile.

"…Nn… that's right. Sorry for saying something so weird, Yuuki, Ran."

She rubbed her eyes several times with both hands like Yuuki earlier and wiped her tears off. She showed a full, toothy smile and continued in a lively voice.

"Don't worry about it! I have the goal of carefully raising Roy to become the champion of the next Bug Battle Ultimate Tournament! Besides… it's not like I can actually go to Aincrad, realistically, anyway. SAO doesn't work without a Nerve Gear and connection access is restricted to the IPs the current players use."

Now that she mentioned it, after the Nerve Gears used by everyone aside from the victims of the incident were forcibly confiscated, she had never heard of anyone logging into SAO of their own free will. Loosening the tension in her shoulders, Yuuki smiled along.

"I'll cheer you on at the tournament too. You have to win!"

"Leave it to me!"

Thumping her chest, Merida stretched vigorously and said something that seemed to have just come to her mind.

"That's right, Yuuki, Ran, do you play other VR games?"

Ran replied for Yuuki who had just put what remained of the crepe into her mouth.

"No, we started here and never went anywhere else."

"Eeh, that's such a waste, you can stand on one leg for so long! I'm sure you will do great in practically any game in the action genre…"

She met her elder sister's glance at those words.

She knew there were VR games releasing one after another for the AmuSphere in this one year. The MMORPG, «ALfheim Online», that officially started at nearly the same time as Serene Garden seemed quite popular with its concept of flying in the skies as a fairy, and there were numerous others from the usual genres, such as a horror shooting game where you fought against zombies or an action adventure game where you explored ruins.

However, the thought of trying another game had never come up with her elder sister, not even in their conversations. That was likely due to that guilt from using the Medicuboid to «just play around». Ran, who used a modified Nerve Gear provided free of charge, probably felt likewise.

She mulled over how to explain that to Merida and Ran spoke with a smile.

"We're glad you would say so, but aren't games for the AmuSphere pretty expensive? We wouldn't be able to afford them with our allowances."

That was technically the truth. Some time after their parents passed away, the pair decided to reduce their allowances after discussion. They intended to donate as much of the inheritance their parents left behind to a NPO supporting children with terminal diseases. They were hardly enticed to purchase some game costing almost ten thousand yen.

However, Merida winked once and firmly shook her head.

"Ah, that's okay! There are now games out with free clients that charge for items."

"Eh… you mean, the game itself is free…!?"

A firm nod came this time as a reply to her startled questioning.

"YES! You only have to download and install the software to play. It'll cost money to buy support items or cool equipment, but it's not like I top-up either."

"Ooh… what game is that?"

Ran asked in a surprisingly curious tone. Merida showed herself gripping something at her left waist before swinging her right hand onto the table with a whoosh.

"It's been a while, but it's a Japanese style MMO called, «Asuka Empire». You become and fight as a samurai, a ninja, or a miko. It's nice with the scenery completely different from SereGa… like ridiculously huge castles or super pretty shrines."

"…Fight…"

Yuuki unwittingly muttered.

It was only natural to fight in a game. However, she felt hesitation towards fighting another player in a virtual world with swords, guns, or other such weapons. Unlike some character displayed on a monitor… the opponent was an avatar and at the same time, a real person. She

doubted she could seriously cut, shoot, or hit such an opponent while knowing that.

However, Ran then voiced out more words that crossed her expectations.

"That sounds fun, truly."

"Doesn't it?!"

Merida leaned across the table with her eyes glittering.

"Hey, if you're willing, how about taking a peek at Asuka? I'll bring you around!"

"I wonder…"

"I'll take photos of you two dressed as miko and samurai! I'm sure they'll look great on both of you!"

"Let's see…"

"Also, you can eat all the anmitsu, sweet red bean soup, and warabimochi you want!"

"……!!"

Yuuki did not miss how Ran's shoulders jerked. Her elder sister loved red bean soup with mochi the most after their mother's homemade crepes and she could not have it not just in Serene Garden but the hospital's cafeteria as well.

In order to give a helping hand to her elder sister, torn between the guilt of playing games, the longing for an unknown world, and the temptation of red bean paste, Yuuki steeled her determination and shouted.

"Let's go, nee-chan, Merida's even inviting us! I'm sure we can get permission!"

With that, Ran looked at Yuuki, somewhat surprised, before showing a rare pure smile and nodding.

"That's right… let's give it a try!"

"Yay!"

Merida clapped her hands together loudly and glanced up at the sky.

"Today… wouldn't be possible, huh. I'll mail instructions on installing Asuka Empire to your SereGa account, so how about one o'clock, tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yes, sure."

Upon Ran's nodding, she stood up energetically as her ponytail bounced and extended her hands, both left and right.

"Yuuki, Ran, I'm really happy becoming friends with the both of you. Let's have fun together from now on!"

Blinded by that forthright gaze and those words, Yuuki stood up along with her elder sister and firmly shook the hand of her first friend in quite some time.

4

The next day, 12th May, was a Sunday.

The entire hospital felt a little quieter with the outpatient services taking a break. That said, she felt that only when she was outside the Medicuboid, undergoing an inspection or bathing.

As Yuuki could not utilize the shared bathrooms for the wards with their high risk of infection, a special bathing unit in the form of a pod was installed in the adjacent sterilized room. The bathtub portion was insanely confined and it seemed more like being washed than bathing, but still, it honestly felt good being able to wash her body and head with hot water.

Though there was a super large bathhouse in Serene Garden, or rather, something closer to a spa resort, the sensation of the hot water differed from the real world as expected and besides, she was reluctant to bare her body in front of others, even if it was limited to her avatar. That always made Ran tease her with a "you're thinking too much", however.

Refreshed after her Sunday morning bathtime, Yuuki sterilized herself fully before wearing a scrub in place of pajamas, returned to the cleanroom, and then lay down on the Medicuboid prototype number two's high-density . Compared to prototype number one, «MFT1», prototype number two, with its official name a cross between "medical" and "cuboid", was mainly in the form of a large box as its name suggests. It seemed prototype number three, still in development, would be even bigger, but Yuuki had no idea if she would have the chance to see it.

Those thoughts came to her as she lay on the bed in a daze before a faint voice surfaced from the depths of her mind.

—With that, maybe I'll find a purpose to live…

A purpose to live.

Despite most of the elderly players participating in Serene Garden becoming astonishingly active once they jump into a VR world of their own will, she still hear pessimistic words from them at times.

—There is no cure, so I'm better off dead.

—Nothing good will happen, so what use is there in living?

Ran would encourage and cheer on such elderly whenever she met with any. However, Yuuki found it hard to follow in her steps. After all, a similar lack of meaning resided within herself.

Up until half a year ago, she could try her very best solely for the purpose of not making her mother and father sad. No matter how much it hurt, she would always stay cheerful before them. She thought she could do anything if it could bring a smile to her papa and mama whom she loved. However, they were no longer around.

Her most-cherished elder sister still stayed by her side now. She would never say or do anything to upset Ran. But—if, in the one-in-a-million chance that Ran ended up where their parents were, leaving Yuuki behind. She truly doubted she could find any purpose to live on beyond that.

No, Ran would never leave Yuuki on her own. Ran would never die as long as Yuuki lived, and likewise for the other way round.

The client for the VRMMO game, «Asuka Empire», was already installed with Doctor Kurahashi's permission—though he emphasized on how her position as a Medicuboid tester had to be kept secret—and she was done creating her avatar too. After confirming the time, she laid her head down onto the headrest and manually lowered the headgear portion.

Shutting her eyelids while listening to the faint whirl of the machine, she recited the full-dive initialization command, the one and only aspect shared with the Nerve Gear and AmuSphere.

"…Link start!"

Yuuki chose the newly added Asuka Empire icon from the application startup launcher instead of the usual Serene Garden and her consciousness began falling into a digital darkness.

A ring of light approached from where her feet pointed and upon passing under it, light expanded within her vision.

She blinked once right as her two feet touched the ground. Elegant shades of color sprang into her eyes after she raised her face.

Red, yellow, vermillion, with orange. Countless trees, their leaves tinted in vivid hues and swaying in the breeze, surrounded her in the rectangular space.

The sky was a transparent blue. White gravel covered the ground and made light creaks as she moved her feet. A shrine gate rose ahead, dyed

in red far deeper than the leaves, and the gravel road reached out beyond it.

"…This certainly is quite a change from Serene Garden."

She glanced towards her side at that voice and saw a girl standing there dressed in a kimono with a plain but cute design. Though her facial features differed subtly from both the real world and Serene Garden, she knew it was Ran straight away from her hairstyle and the quality of her voice. No other player could be seen around.

Yuuki nodded while confirming that the kimono she wore was of the same design in a different color.

"It's kind of like a 'now this is Japan!' feeling, huh?"

"Indeed. Your elder sister here is getting her hopes up pretty high."

"For the sweet red bean soup, you mean?"

"Naturally!"

They heard swift, light footsteps coming from the shrine gate's direction after their lighthearted conversation. The one who ran over, mostly inclined forward, was a girl with a fluttering long ponytail.

Jumping up high after passing under the shrine gate, she completed consecutive somersaults in the air and landed before the pair's eyes.

"Ooh!"

Yuuki and Ran clapped and the girl, settling down in her bright green costume that seemed exactly like what a ninja would wear, bowed as though she had just concluded a play. The character name, [Merida], hovered above her head after staring at her for a bit. It was a function unavailable in Serene Garden.

"Sorry for the wait! Welcome to Asuka Empire!"

Raising her head, Merida lightly leaned back, as though impressed by their avatars which were a little more dashing than yesterday's, the moment she saw them both.

"Yuuki, Ran, you're both great at creating avatars! They look so cute and it resembles your avatars in SereGa too."

"O-Oh really… I only played around a little with the default set, though…"

Answering so, Yuuki finally noticed something unfamiliar floating at the top-left of her view.

Long, narrow bars in blue and green were lined up with one above the other, and her name, [Yuuki], was displayed below them. As she focused harder, the texts, [LP 350/350] and [SP 100/100], floated within the blue and green bars respectively.

Likely guessing at what she saw from where she looked at, Merida pointed with her index finger and spoke.

"If you haven't played anything but SereGa, this must be the first time you're seeing those, huh? The green's life points, how much you can survive for. And the blue's soul points, it decreases when you use arts or skills. You're still «Novices», so both of you have the same values, but either of those will shoot up after you do the initiation quest in the town and decide on a class."

"Hmm… What's your class, Merida? Well, I can imagine from your appearance, though."

Ran asked and Merida grinned with her two hands forming complex shapes one after another. Probably the so-called seals.

"Hah!"

It ended with a yell. Merida's body was enveloped in faint blue smoke in that moment and vanished. Despite scanning around with Ran, they found no trace of her. The sound of feet on gravel quietly echoed out

and Yuuki sensed a presence behind—just as she was hugged tightly from behind.

"Caught you, Yuuki!"

Smoke rose once again with that voice and the two arms embracing Yuuki appeared.

"Wah, I'm no stag beetle!"

She wriggled and Merida loosened her arms with a bright smile, returning to where she had stood. Ran who had watched on amused nodded while speaking.

"That is to say, you're a ninja, aren't you, Merida?"

"You got it! To be accurate, ninja's the advanced class for the thief, though. All new players are initiated as either a «swordsman», a «thief», or an «spell user», classing up into samurai, bowmaster, ninja, miko, or warrior monk, among others."

"Oooh… I wonder what should I be?"

"Such worries are what make MMOs fun!"

Grinning, Merida pointed towards the shrine gate.

"Now, let's go! Asuka's capital is that way!"

In the supposed setting for the game, Asuka Empire, the Yamato dynasty that flourished in ancient Kinki had continued its rule for over a thousand years.

The capital, Kiyomihara, was an extensive castle town arranged in a grid and it roughly covered three times as much area as Serene Garden's capital, Serenity.

Likewise, the maximum number of concurrent users connecting at any one time was second after the most popular VRMMO, ALfheim Online,

and the capital on a Sunday afternoon was flooded with players clad in Japanese clothing. Witnessing that many players gathered together in a virtual world for the first time, Yuuki and Ran silently stood still after passing under the large southern gate.

It was not purely due to their numbers. The energy filling the virtual streets, its liveliness, or perhaps, chaos, was utterly different from Serene Garden. The main streets which were no less than thirty meters wide had groups in a bustling conversation or hostile squabbles, as well as those with street stalls by the road's sides.

"Fwah… there are so many people…"

Yuuki muttered and Merida tossed in an assenting "I know, right?!".

She continued, softer, while urging the sisters to start walking.

"Right after the SAO incident happened, everyone was afraid of VR games and there were all of those regulations formed regarding the full-dive technology… but I guess this world has a certain «something» absent from those old games, doesn't it? Something that prevents you from ever returning to a monitor and controller after experiencing it…"

Yuuki, too, understood what Merida was saying.

Though she did not know if she would continue to play Asuka Empire from now on as well, her days would become much duller should she be denied from entering Serene Garden. Chatting, eating snacks, searching for harvestable items, and studying together with Ran… she reflected each day on her fortune in being able to experience such times.

Thousands of players in Asuka Empire must regard it similarly despite their different worlds. Not as a time sink for boredom, nor as escapism from the real world. And the same must be true for Merida too. It was because she found something here that she could push herself to become a ninja, an advanced class.

However, Merida implied that she wished to return to Sword Art Online at the crepe shop in Roite Village yesterday. She said she might find a

purpose to live if she did while her tears fell. Did that mean Merida could not find what she truly sought here, in Asuka Empire? In that case, what was different between Asuka Empire and Sword Art Online, both which were similarly VRMMO games…?

"Look, there's the «Initiation Point»!"

Yuuki woke up from her thoughts at Merida's lively voice. She looked and saw a noticeably larger, towering building with three entrances.

"Yuuki, Ran, which do you want to become, swordsman, thief, or spell user?"

"How are those three different?"

Merida politely answered Ran who was not very familiar with games.

"Swordsmen go in front, fight with weapons or hand-to-hand, and take on enemies' attacks. Thieves move nimbly, create disorder, and take care of other miscellaneous tasks. Spell users attack and support with magic from the back… I guess?"

"Hmm-hmm, I see."

Tilting her head in the direction Ran did, Yuuki, too, decided after a mere five seconds of thought.

"Then I'll be a swordsman!"

"I will go with a spell user."

Merida giggled and smiled the moment she heard the pair's replies.

"I knew it'll end up like that. Well then, go get the quest from inside, Yuuki, you enter from the middle, and Ran, you from the right. I'll help out, so let's get the initiation quest over with quick!"

"Yeaah!"

Shouting with their right hands raised, Yuuki began running after exchanging a nod with Ran.

The experience of fighting with a realistic monster by swinging a weapon held in her own hands was quite something.

Though she ran away screaming whenever the rat the size of a large dog charged at her at first, she grew to fight without getting scared after realizing it did not hurt when she got bitten—aside from mild discomfort—and no blood spilt when she slashed it—aside from a spray of red light instead. Ran did exterminate the large rats with practically no concern from the beginning instead, however.

Thanks to Merida's cooperation as a proficient ninja, they finished the whole five stages of the initiation quest in two hours, and Yuuki and Ran successfully became a swordsman and spell user. When she invited them for some food to celebrate, Ran's immediate request was, naturally enough, sweet red bean soup.

"Fwaaah…"

Ran expressed her impression with an odd sound the moment the lacquered soup bowls, vapor rising from them, were brought over.

"Amazing, it's flawless, Merida. The charred mochi, the granularity of the red bean paste, the accompanying salted kombu, even the store's atmosphere, it's all absolutely perfect."

"…I-I'm glad you like it."

"If only I knew there was such delicious sweet red bean soup here, I would have been here ages ago…"

Muttering the thoughts true to her heart, she brought her two hands together in prayer and picked up the lacquered chopsticks.

Yuuki waited for her elder sister to take a mouthful before bringing the soup to her own mouth. A gentle sweetness and the azuki paste's flavor

welled up, followed by the mochi's aroma. Though her fondness of it faltered behind her elder sister's, it certainly tasted good.

The trio finished their food with barely any conversation before simultaneously letting out a sigh.

Ran lowered her chopsticks and sipped some tea before speaking.

"… It was really delicious. Thank you for bringing us here, Merida."

"I'm just as glad, hearing you say that."

"Still… this Kiyomihara town is set where Asuka is in the real world, isn't it?"

"That's right, why?"

Ran pointed towards the menu on the table at Merida tilting her head.

"«Sweet red bean soup» is called

mainly in the Kantou region.

It's mainly in the Kantou region where the one using coarse red bean paste is called «oshiruko». In Kansai, the one using coarse red bean paste is called «zenzai» and the one using strained red bean paste is called «oshiruko»."

"Ooh?! Then the one using strained bean paste is «zenzai» in Kantou?"

"Regarding that, both of them are called «oshiruko» in Kantou and «zenzai» refers to the coarse red bean paste without any sap placed on mochi or shiratama."

"Oooh! I'm from Tokyo, but I didn't know. So, that means this shop is Kantou-styled since they delivered coarse red bean paste when ordering oshiruko…?"

Ran solemnly shook her head towards Merida who appeared impressed.

"No, that is still unconfirmed. It may be the reverse as you have said, Merida, and…"

Struck with inspiration there, Yuuki peeked into her elder sister's face while shouting.

"Ah, I get it! You're saying all that, but actually, you just want to order zenzai here as well, don't you!"

"Ehehe, you realized, huh?"

Merida smiled happily upon seeing Ran stick out her tongue.

Though the additional order of «zenzai» was neither strained red bean paste nor without sap but coarse red bean paste with chestnut, the trio unanimously found it delicious and gobbled it up, exiting the shop only after the sun had went down quite a bit.

"Aah, I wonder if I can eat dinner after finishing off two bowls of sweet red bean soup at this late…"

Merida grumbled while rubbing her stomach.

"It's strange, isn't it, how you really become full despite it just being food in a virtual world."

"No kidding…" Yuuki nodded deeply and spoke.

"I hear that it's because the full-dive machine stimulates mastication center a whole lot when eating that it causes the linked satiety center to get tricked."

"Ooh… wait, I've been getting impressed over and over again since earlier! You're way more knowledgeable than me, aren't you, Yuuki, Ran?"

"Nah, I'm just repeating what I was taught."

Merida showed a face like waking from a dream for a brief instant upon seeing Yuuki narrow her shoulders. She must have noticed that the one

who «taught» Yuuki was not a teacher in a school but the physician attending to her in the hospital.

Leaving the cafe for traditional Japanese sweets, in an obscure spot like the crepe shop yesterday, the trio walked side-by-side through the deserted back streets. The clogs of plain wood Ran wore clip-clopped over the stone paving, producing a forlorn noise.

Merida spoke in a slightly lower voice after a short while.

"I see… Your doctor recognizes full-dive, huh, Yuuki?"

"Yeah…"

Rather than just recognizing it, Doctor Kurahashi was the one who recommended Yuuki to become a tester for the Medicuboid she now used. It appeared he, who was still a young man, held big hopes for the full-dive technology in regards to end-of-life care. However, Yuuki could not talk with Merida regarding that due to her current obligation for confidentiality.

"…What about yours, Merida?"

She asked back and those shoulders covered in an ash green ninja outfit shriveled a little.

"Mine… isn't too receptive, I guess? I had to ask over and over again to register an account for SereGa too… It looks like he doesn't believe in any connection between palliative care through VR and the improvement of QoL."

QoL was an abbreviation for quality of life and palliative care aims to soften one's societal worries, both in a physical and mental sense, to improve one's QoL. AmuSphere possess the ability to cancel bodily sensations and can intercept a certain level of suffering from illness, so there were loud voices pushing for it as a replacement for painkillers which cause side effects or dependency.

However, on the other hand, patients in a full-dive state appeared no different from someone bedridden from the outside, so there a firmly rooted opinion questioning whether that could be considered an improvement to one's quality of life. Merida's attending physician must be of that mind.

Yuuki still did not know who was correct. Serene Garden and Asuka Empire were both captivating worlds and she thought the time spent there with Ran to be extremely precious, but she had practically no chance left to come into contact with Aiko in the real world. She might had been happier, staying with her elder sister physically throughout the day, entering neither virtual worlds nor the cleanroom… that thought did occur to her once in a blue moon.

Ran opened her mouth in place of Yuuki who looked downwards, stuck in her thoughts.

"…I believe it is unavoidable that the full-dive technology has a bad reputation now with the SAO incident still unresolved. But… I wish to believe in the potential this world holds. We only met you, Merida, because Serene Garden was there and I'm sure we will meet many more people from now on too. Even if we are only connected through virtual worlds… I believe our feelings are real."

"Nn…… that is, true."

Merida placed her had on her own chest and nodded.

"I'm happy I got to meet you two too, Yuuki, Ran. I will always remember the time spent with you both in my heart… not in my avatar, but in the real me."

Despite Merida's bright tone, the word, remember, left an oppressive, depressing echo in the alley at sunset.

She said she had continued treatment for her brain tumor for a whole year. She must have been pondering on how much time she had left since then. That was exactly why Merida was seeking a purpose to her life in virtual worlds.

"…I'm glad too."

Muttering so, Yuuki raised her right hand and gently grasped Merida's left hand as they walked beside each other.

"I have distanced myself from everyone but nee-chan in Serene Garden ever since I started. I was scared of hurting others or getting hurt… –But yesterday, Merida, you went ahead and came crashing straight at us. That was why we became friends so quickly, wasn't it?"

Merida widened her eyes for a moment there before showing a full smile and firmly gripping Yuuki's hand back.

"Thanks, Yuuki! I'm really happy you said that! …But yesterday might have been just because my mind was filled with thoughts about the stag beetle…"

"That's no different from us, Yuuki and I had our minds filled with thoughts about crepes or sweet red bean soup too."

Ran spoke while holding onto Merida's right hand, throwing all three into loud laughter. Yuuki felt a comforting breeze blow through her chest as they laughed on and on.

It did not matter whether they were in the real world or a virtual one if they could laugh like this.

She wanted to laugh much, much more, as much as she could, with the time she had left. She wanted to be able to crash into someone else again by her own impulse like what Merida had done for her.

Yuuki made that strong wish for the first time since she was hospitalized–no, since she transferred in elementary school.

5

"Now that I think about it, it's almost your birthday, isn't it?"

As Doctor Kurahashi removed the stethoscope and suddenly said so, Yuuki unconsciously shifted her sight towards the bottom-right.

However, there was no time display window in the real world and there could not have been a calendar hung on the cleanroom's walls, so she asked with upturned eyes.

"Erm… what day in May was it today?"

Kurahashi smiled beyond the cleanroom suit's thick mask at that.

"It's the sixteenth. Both of you, Konno Yuuki-kun and Aiko-kun, were born on the twenty-third, weren't you?"

"Yes, we were."

Yuuki secured the buttons on the scrub made from anti-dust material while nodding and Kurahashi spoke in a contemplative tone after a short pause.

"So you're turning fourteen too, aren't you, Konno Yuuki-kun… You sure have grown…"

"Eh… personally, I wish I grew a little taller."

"Hahaha, don't worry, you still have more to go."

After laughing kindly, Kurahashi pat Yuuki's head, stroked it, and stood up.

"Then, I'll see you again next week."

"Yes, see you, doctor."

Accompanying Kurahashi until the door to the sterilized room closed, she lay down on the gel bed.

She was admitted to General Hospital Kouhoku immediately after her birthday the year before last, so this made it two years. Yuuki spent over half of that time in this cleanroom.

Until a little while ago, she had the desire to chase after Doctor Kurahashi after their weekly consultation and leap out to confirm if the real world still existed as it did–she was driven by that impulse. However, she seemed to have become barely conscious of herself being shut away in this off-white locked room these days.

That must be because she came into contact with so many players in the new world she jumped into on Merida's invitation five days ago. Despite them only close enough to exchange niceties and a word or two in the streets or fields, she could still sense their enthusiasm. Even with the SAO incident, there were still many enjoying VR games in the world, giving birth to new adventures and stories each day.

She sat her head on the headrest while lying on the . She lowered the headgear, determined to make this the day she class changed into an advanced class, and shut her eyelids.

"Jaruooon!"

A demon-type monster, likely over three meters tall, swung its brusque war sword with a strange roar. A bluish-black light effect emitted from the two horns extending through its stiff, disheveled hair and enveloped the massive blade.

"Yuu, skill incoming!"

Shouting back—

"Leave it to me, nee-chan!"

—to Ran, Yuuki raised her own katana straight, above her head.

The last boss of the advancement quest, «*Akuro Ou*» *, was a tough opponent with a wide variety of five area-of-effect offensive skills in the *tachi* line. They would suffer the splash damage spreading out afterwards if they simply avoided its attacks and be incapable of shifting to counterattacking.

As the «tank», the swordsman's role is to take on as many attacks as possible rather than dodge them. For Yuuki, whose stats were still low as she was still in the initial class, she could only match them by launching her own skills rather than simply defending against them with her weapon.

She had to time it within the split second between Akuro Ou first swinging its war sword down and the moment that skill causes damage.

Widely opening her two eyes, she held her breath, and glared at the enemy's tachi. Along with what sounded like a shrill buzzing, the enemy's movement slowed down bit by bit. She slipped into this state at times recently when she focused as hard as she could. It was in that instant when the gigantic war sword finished «charging» and began moving.

——Now!!

Shouting out in her mind, Yuuki stomped her left foot onto the ground.

In Asuka Empire, a system called «Ground Circle» was used to activate skills or spirit spells. By stepping down hard with one's weapon at ready, icons for usable skills or spells would be displayed at one's feet in a ring and those would activate after being chosen with a second step.

At the start, she had to temporarily drop her gaze to the ground and confirm it visually if she wanted to step on the desired icon, but lately, she became capable of selecting them without looking.

"Yaaaaahh!"

Letting out a yell that finally sounded good after all those other times, she stepped on the icon with her right foot and simultaneously jumped with all her might. The katana gleamed orange as the anti-air type skill, «Himukai», activated.

"Jajaaah!!"

Akuro Ou let out its second roar. However, Yuuki's anti-air skill had already made a fierce blow on the war sword by then. The orange glint tore at the bluish-black effect and dispersed it. With its war sword solidly repelled, Akuro Ou's huge frame leaned backwards.

"Now, nee-chan, Merida!"

The moment Yuuki cried out while falling, white strips of paper—Ran's «charms»—flew forth and stuck onto Akuro Ou's brow. The charms shone and deployed a complex, three-dimensional magic circle, inducing huge explosions.

Three silhouettes ran about the feet of the boss monster, groaning as it staggered, at breakneck speed and ninja swords carved in countless gashes. It was Merida's body shadow offensive skill. The boss's LP bar fell like a flash with several pixels remaining.

There, Akuro Ou recovered from the delay it suffered from having its skill interrupted and at the same time, Yuuki's cooldown time ended. Setting the katana at her left waist, she stepped down once more. The very moment she sensed the Ground Circle appearing, she stomped straight down on the icon placed in front with her right foot.

"Haaaa——!"

The long range of the *iai*-type skill, «Suminagi», struck the boss's weak point, the horns on its brow, and slashed them off. With its LP bar finally reaching zero, Akuro Ou scattered into all directions as blue flames.

The trio's cheers blended together with the victory music announcing the end of the battle that had continued for over twenty minutes.

Having reported the quest completion to a NPC at Kiyomihara and class changed with joy to a «samurai» and a «miko», Yuuki and Ran gazed at each other's entirely changed outfits upon exiting the building. Those were flashy clothes that suited a RPG well, completely different from the plain ones they normally wore in Serene Garden, and they laughed

together with a *nihihihi* out of both happiness and embarrassment before a familiar voice descended from above.

"Yuuki, Ran, congratulations on your class change!"

They looked up and there Merida was, waving her hand while sitting on the building's extensive eaves. Nimbly jumping down with a single somersault in the air, she landed before the pair.

"Good work, both of you. Reaching an advanced class in five days is pretty fast!"

"It's because you helped us out for hours every day, Merida. Thank you."

With Ran replying so with a smile, Yuuki added on a "Thanks!" as well. Merida shook her head, embarrassed.

"No, I'm the one who invited you to Asuka, so I should be doing that much at least… I mean, I had lots of fun too. I rarely play in a party."

As her knowledge on Asuka Empire had increased by quite a bit over these five days, Yuuki already knew Merida's class, ninja, was said to be the most geared towards solo play even among all of the advanced classes. And she could imagine the reason for that choice too.

By registering those you meet through playing in a party as friends or taking a step further and entering a guild would likely increase the chance of conversations shifting beyond the game. Having the subject ending up as life in the real world would be equivalent to being forced into a difficult choice for Yuuki, Ran, and Merida. They could explain the facts, that they were hospitalized with severe illness and played VR games as a part of palliative care or they could dodge the question. Others would treat them differently if they went clean and lying was just as distressing.

Five days ago, Yuuki wished to become capable of crashing straight into someone else like Merida did. But that was no simple task. Even Merida herself must be fighting against the wall in her heart that she built up herself.

Ran lightly pat Yuuki's back that had slumped over without her notice.

"Let's go, Yuu, Merida wanted to celebrate our class change."

"Eh, ah… yeah! Then I'll vote for that shop from the other time!"

"Okay! There are still lots more tasty dishes there!"

Merida showed a full grin, stood up, and led them.

Yuuki, Ran, and Merida finished the cream anmitsu, kuzumochi, and green tea parfait they respectively ordered while exchanging morsels, sipped their hot tea, and sighed deeply as one.

"Ah, what bliss… Japanese sweets and green tea, no other combination could be any better…"

Yuuki mutely nodded, agreeing with Ran who had murmured with both eyes closed. Though crepe went well with coffee, black tea, and milk, they were no match for the pairing of sweets made with red bean paste and green tea.

"Speaking of great combinations, you sisters are amazing, Ran, Yuuki. Your breathing during battle in totally in sync, I can't believe you're supposed to be newbies at VRMMOs."

As Merida suddenly said that, she exchanged glances with her elder sister and they both shrugged at the same time.

"I-I'm just swinging my katana in front, it's nee-chan who's matching my timing, so…"

Or so Yuuki uttered—

"I am only using my spells from behind, so I can watch how Yuu moves and…"

—at the exact time Ran did, making Merida burst into laughter upon hearing them.

"Look, you're way too in sync! Well, that's not the only thing amazing, though. Both of you can use skills without looking at your feet, right? It took around a month before I could do that!"

"That's, well… this Asuka Empire is our first VRMMO. As you have experience from other games before this, Merida, it was tough switching over, wasn't it? Or do all VRMMOs share the same battle system?"

Ran asked and Merida first nodded her head with a smile before shaking it.

"Ah, there was that, maybe… The battle system was completely different."

Glancing around, she confirmed the cafe for traditional Japanese sweets was devoid of other players, and then continued softly.

"There was no magic and you could fight only with weapons in Sword Art Online as its name suggest, but the skills… the «sword skills» would activate just by getting in the right posture and unlike Asuka, the skills aren't only one-hit."

"Not just one-hit…?"

She tilted her head, unable to imagine the meaning of those words, and Merida held the long and narrow spoon for the parfait in her right hand and agilely moved it vertically twice and horizontally once.

"Yep. In other words, they're «consecutive hit skills». You can keep swinging your katana with normal, non-skill attacks in Asuka too, but the weight in SAO was totally different. By putting your weapon in the right pose and activating the sword skill, your body would partially move on its own, you see… your sword would fly everywhere and swing three, four times at an absurd speed. You have to ready your katana, step down to open the circle, and step down again on the icon before you can finally let out a one-hit skill when fighting in Asuka, so it might have felt sluggish at the start… half of the reason for changing into a ninja might had been because I got to move around faster with a lighter body whenever I felt like that."

Neither Yuuki nor Ran could ask Merida, "What was the other half?", after she spoke with a bright smile. Instead, they laughed alongside her.

"Ahaha, you certainly can't stay still at all, Merida. I would see you somewhere there and a second later, you would end up here."

Merida replied Ran's comment with a "'Twere naught but the fundamentals of a ninja!" before her expression settled down. She slowly blinked as though recalling the boss battle and opened her mouth once more.

…You see, what I really think is amazing, Yuuki, Ran, is your foresight. Especially so for Yuuki today… you completely saw through the «pattern» for Akuro Ou's area of effect skill at the end, didn't you? There are barely any even among the top players who can thwart a boss's stronger skills for over ten times straight. It was no coincidence you managed to catch that Royal Triton Stag Beetle in Serene Garden, was it?"

Yuuki's mouth hung open upon being told those unexpected words.

It had always been her elder sister who got the praises at these times. Ran always won, be it at marks on a test, skill at drawing, or foot races. That should have been no different in virtual worlds. Yuuki could think of only one possibility why she appeared more amazing than Ran in Merida's eyes. The difference in specifications between the Nerve Gear her elder sister used and the Medicuboid prototype number two she used.

"N… no, you're wrong, Merida."

Shaking her head in a daze, Yuuki spoke out.

"Actually, I hadn't been using an AmuSphere…"

But she choked there.

Doctor Kurahashi had told her to keep quiet about being a tester for the Medicuboid when she was going to Asuka Empire.

Yuuki could say nothing to Merida who awaited the continuation with an astonished expression and the one who saved her out of that silence was, as usual, Ran.

She began with a calm, gentle "You see…".

"…Merida. Forgive us for keeping quiet about it until now. As Yuu mentioned, we are not using AmuSpheres. We use modified Nerve Gears prepared by our doctor in the hospital."

Yuuki knew she could only explain so. But that was half falsehood. Prototype number one was still fine, but number two that Yuuki now used could hardly be called a modified Nerve Gear.

Yuuki strongly regretted making her elder sister lie due to her own careless prattle. She gripped her hands tight atop her lap and her elder sister's fingertips gently caressed those fists. As though insisting it was fine.

Merida showed no sign of noticing the exchange between the sisters under the table. Her eyes grew large and she murmured in a barely audible voice.

"Nerve Gear…"

After blinking numerous times, she continued in a voice still rough.

"By modified, you mean it's safe…?"

"Yes… or so I have heard. The battery's capacity was reduced, a limiter was inserted, and it can't release any dangerous radio waves, they said. As the hospital decided to assertively adopt VR for palliative care, they prepared them for Yuu and me."

"I… see…"

Perhaps finally sobering from her surprise, Merida nodded twice or thrice before speaking.

"…True, I also felt the response rate of the AmuSphere to be a little slower than the Nerve Gear when I first used it and the sensations didn't seem as clear too… but you can't fight like that thanks to the machine's specifications alone. Yuuki, Ran, both of you really are amazing."

No one could argue any further against her grin.

Merida showed an even larger smile upon seeing the sisters silenced with complicated expressions on.

"Anyway, once again, congratulations on changing classes! If you still have time, let's go take some photos at the imperial palace. The advanced gear looks super good on both of you!"

"Yeah, you are right, let's go!"

Ran energetically nodded in her miko outfit and Yuuki finally got back her smile.

That day, they had a photo shoot at the entrance to the gorgeous palace where «Mikado» lived, taking commemorative screenshots—though the concept of «screens» was absent from VR worlds—before dispersing.

Yuuki, Ran, and Merida continued having fun, playing in Asuka Empire from then on. At times, they returned to Serene Garden to watch over the stag beetle's growth and to eat crepes at that secret-ish cafe. Though Merida had around two more vertigo attacks, she never lost her usual bright smile.

The fulfilling times passed all too quickly and it became evening on the twenty-first of May, two days before Yuuki's and Ran's fourteenth birthdays.

The pair was approached with an utterly unexpected proposal from Merida.

"Mundane as usual, isn't it? You should at least configure walls or a ceiling."

Appearing in Yuuki's «room», her private VR space, Ran looked around before speaking in an exasperated tone.

The only ones allowed within this room constructed in the Medicuboid prototype number two's main memory were currently Yuuki and Ran. That was if it could even be called a room, however, with no fixed objects aside from a bleak bed and several windows haphazardly floating about the surrounding darkness.

Half of the windows showed the various status information regarding the Medicuboid and the remaining displayed random television and news websites. The largest window in front reflected the interior of the cleanroom as seen by the cameras equipped on number two in real-time and served as a peeking window for the real world from the virtual world.

Lying down on the hard floor in pajamas, Yuuki looked up at Ran, similarly clothed, as she replied.

"This is fine! If I customize this place all realistic like our house in Serene Garden, I think I'll lose track of whether I'm in reality or a virtual world!"

Patting the space beside herself with her palm, she continued with what she thought more important.

"Nee-chan, how about singing that for the first time in a while?"

"Yeah, yeah, you are one spoiled child, aren't you, Yuu."

Ran was sitting with proper posture as she smiled and Yuuki placed her head on her lap, shutting her eyes. Just as she loosened the strength throughout her body, a tender hand caressed her head as a hushed voice sang on.

It was a lullaby by Mother Goose named "Hush, Little Baby". One their mother often sang for them. Though the strange lyrics involved buying

all sorts of queer items for a baby, like a mirror, a billy goat, or a horse and cart, she loved that about them.

Though her avatar's voice was synthesized using samples from the real world like her face, it hardly sounded off. The gentle voice's song spread out like ripples and filled the space lacking walls or a ceiling.

So hush little baby, don't you cry,

Daddy loves you and so do I.

Daddy loves you and so do I. *

Concluding the lullaby with that repeated final verse, Ran continued stroking her head for a bit.

With how the time was passing ten o'clock as well, Yuuki wavered between wakefulness and slumber, and Ran flicked a finger at her forehead.

"Come on, Yuu, don't fall asleep. We still have yet to discuss our main topic."

"Snore… ah, that's right…"

Putting her all into lifting her dropping eyelids, she lifted herself up with an *oof*. Sitting opposite her elder sister, she murmured with her arms crossed.

"Yeaah…… —What shall we do, nee-chan?"

Not even Ran with her usual lightning-quick decisiveness had an immediate answer this time.

The suggestion Merida suddenly gave that evening. Her desire to visit Yuuki and Ran two days later, on the twenty-third, and to celebrate their birthdays. Of course, not in a virtual world, but at Yokohama General Hospital Kouhoku in the real world.

Merida was admitted to a hospital in Tokyo's Shinagawa Ward, so it would not even take an hour by car. Her family would naturally be accompanying her and there was no real issue for Merida.

However, Yuuki and Ran could not immediately say that they would warmly welcome her. After all, even if she bothered to come, Yuuki could not meet with Merida in person due to the Medicuboid's confidentiality and neither could she explain why.

She was extremely happy Merida would come to the hospital even if she could not meet with her directly. Even if only Ran could meet with her, it would be pure bliss hearing about it later on.

But what if Merida could not accept it when told "you cannot meet with Yuuki"…? What if it meant her losing her first friend made in such a long time…?

"……Let's believe in Merida."

Ran broke the long silence so.

"Nee-chan… but…"

"If it's Merida, I'm sure she will understand even if we tell her that she cannot meet with you due to your circumstances, Yuu. I don't believe she definitely won't become angry due to that. Besides… if Merida brings along her AmuSphere and dives in with me from my hospital room, she can come here, can't she?"

"Eh, y-you're calling her hereee!?"

She unwittingly shouted out and Ran nodded with a mischievous look.

"I'm sure Merida will be glad, too, if we have a birthday party in your room, Yuu."

"Y-Yeah… guess I'll customize it to be a bit more girly…"

Yuuki scanned through the dark space that practically screamed virtual reality as she murmured and Ran pat her shoulder before standing up.

"You better hurry, then. You only have until the day after tomorrow. — Not that I will be helping, though."

"Eeeeh~~"

"You simply have to do as you like, Yuu, I am sure Merida will prefer that. Well, I should be getting back about now. Shall I tell Merida that she's welcomed?"

"…Yeah!"

Yuuki stood up as well and nodded with force. Rather than shrinking away due to her fear over hurting or getting hurt, she would crash straight into it. Merida herself taught her to do so.

Ran left after bidding good night and Yuuki took yet another look around her own virtual room. A birthday party would need a few more tables and chairs. And more importantly, walls and a ceiling.

Even if it would be reset in a single day, she would still put her heart into the remodeling, to make her precious friend feel welcome. Deciding so, Yuuki turned towards the configuration window that had been exposed all this while.

Thursday, 23rd May, 2 PM.

Merida arrived at Yokohama General Hospital Kouhoku in a car driven by her mother.

Merida was on a wheelchair as her legs were paralyzed from the brain tumor's effects, but apparently, she had her mother wait in the hospital's cafe and moved to Ran's private room on the eighth floor on her own. The large tote bag she brought along contained two packages, their birthday presents, and an AmuSphere, and the plan was for her to dive into Yuuki's private VR room with Ran from her bed.

But—

Neither Yuuki nor Ran noticed what Merida kept deep in her heart.

Settling her business in the toilet before the dive, Ran return to her private room to see a handwritten letter on her bed and Merida who was already in full-dive beside it. On her head, suffering from hair loss as a side effect from the anticancer drugs, was not the AmuSphere she brought along, but Ran's Nerve Gear.

The letter that started with a sincere apology to Ran and Yuuki and noted down Merida's true feelings and that the game card for "Sword Art Online" was inserted into the Nerve Gear's slot.

"Eh……!"

Informed of the course of events by Ran who appeared at the cutely customized VR room alone, Yuuki needed several seconds before she understood the situation.

Merida was not using the AmuSphere she brought along but Ran's Nerve Gear. That was because—she could not run "SAO" on an AmuSphere. In other words, Merida's diving was done not on impulse but premeditated from the very beginning as she had brought the card for SAO. She had leapt into that virtual world, a true death game, by her own will.

Ran's Nerve Gear was modified with safety measures such as a battery of a smaller capacity or a limiter. But the Nerve Gear normally used a power cable. The socket in the wall provided sufficient power to destroy the wearer's brain when the player's HP hits zero in SAO. They very well could not test on Merida if the limiter could do its job.

"Hey… nee-chan! We have to hurry and take Merida's Nerve Gear off!"

Yuuki felt as though the virtual temperature had taken a steep dive while she shouted and Ran quickly shook her head in return.

"We can't… we can't take the risk removing it by force from the outside."

"Why!? Your Nerve Gear's battery was made smaller, wasn't it, if we plug it out from the source, there shouldn't be any dangerous radio waves…"

"Merida has a tumor in her brain. There may be adverse effects if it's exposed to abnormal levels of radio waves for even an instant. We cannot remove it by force by our own judgement alone."

"Then, let's hurry and call for a doctor…!"

Throwing a childish tantrum towards her elder sister who remained cool despite the situation, Yuuki shouted with all she had.

However, Ran still would not concede. Instead, she placed her hands on Yuuki's two shoulders and whispered as though to calm her down.

"I believe we should do so too. But give me some time before that, just five… no, three minutes will be enough."

"Three minutes… for what?"

Yuuki asked back and Ran replied while staring hard into her eyes.

"We should still make it in time. Come with me, Yuu."

Summoning a door that doubled as an application launcher to the VR room, Yuuki stepped through with Ran and narrowed her eyes at the flood of bright sunlight.

Eastern part of Serene Garden, Roite Village. Now in a green one piece dress, Ran wildly ran through the central plaza while a small NPC band played a tranquil BGM and players sitting on benches conversed harmoniously. Yuuki, too, followed in a hurry.

She could not even guess where her elder sister was headed or why they came to Serene Garden in the first place. Wasn't Merida already on the floating castle, Aincrad, where Sword Art Online took place? There could not possibly be a gate to SAO from Serene Garden.

However, Ran continued running without hesitation and passed under the village's gate before exiting into the verdant hills that unfolded, the fields of Teal Hills. Though she ran on the brick paved path for a bit, she eventually left towards the left and charged straight through the green grasslands.

Yuuki only realized where her elder sister was headed and the reason for that after crossing numerous knolls and seeing a small glistening surface of blue water ahead.

Posts surrounded the pond of twenty meters across with a single tree standing by its side.

This was where Yuuki caught that Royal Triton Stag Beetle.

And where they first met Merida.

Yuuki's two eyes opened wide and caught sight of a petite silhouette squatting at the tree's roots. The green ponytail shook in the wind and glittered in the light.

Running past her elder sister towards the pond's bank in a daze, Yuuki cried out a name just as the silhouette stood up.

"——Merida!!"

Shock ran through her friend's expression as she turned about before that crumbled into one that seemed conflicted between crying and smiling. The voice that called out both of their names reverberated more feebly than any she had heard before.

"……Yuuki. …Ran."

Yuuki gradually slowed down and stood still a short way from Merida. Ran reached her side before long.

Why had Merida dived into Serene Garden despite wearing the Nerve Gear in an attempt to head towards SAO? The reason lay at Merida's feet.

An insect cage with its lid left open and an azure blue stag beetle stopped atop that. Raised several times larger than when they first saw it, the stag beetle slowly moved its antenna as if questioning its owner.

Following Yuuki's gaze downwards, Merida spoke with a smile that would belong on a child holding back tears.

"……Roy just wouldn't fly away, you see. I originally wanted to return it to you, Yuuki, but insects can't be given to others after their owner was decided… so I thought you might catch it again someday if I let it go here……"

Something hot felt stuck in Yuuki's chest the moment she noticed the big drops collecting in Merida's eyes while saying that in her hoarse voice. Ran replied from her side, sounding as though she was holding tears back as well.

"Roy won't run away. You took such good care of it, day after day, Merida. It'll definitely win the tournament for you, too. So… let's go back together with Roy, Merida. No one else knows about this yet, it's just Yuu and me."

She finally understood why her elder sister did not inform Doctor Kurahashi of the situation after hearing those words.

Even if the Nerve Gear was taken off from Merida's head by Kurahashi's judgement, as a doctor, he had to let her mother know. That would mean a stop to her receiving VR palliative care through the AmuSphere and she would never be able to dive into Serene Garden or Asuka Empire again. Ran had bet on the possibility of persuading Merida here to avoid that end.

After taking in a deep breath, Yuuki hurled words filled with all her emotions at her close friend.

"…Please, Merida, don't go to SAO. I want to adventure more with you, Merida. I want to travel more, to visit more with you. So… so…!"

Nevertheless, Merida slowly lowered her eyes and forced her words out, one after another.

"…I'm sorry, Yuuki. I'm sorry, Ran. I know it's your birthdays, but I'm still being a huge bother… I'm really sorry. I won't ask for you to forgive me. But… I… I still have to……"

Her two shoulders under her shirt quivered as they filled with strength. Her strained voice, transient as fragile glass, stream across the grassy plains at afternoon.

"…I saw it on the news a while back. The police are planning to forcibly remove the Nerve Gears from the SAO incident's victims country-wide. But I don't think force will work. There will definitely be many sacrifices…"

It was a little more than ten days ago when her elder sister showed her that article on that knoll near here. Ran had spoken of that same concern Merida voiced out then.

"…I mentioned, didn't I, that in SAO, there were several members of the guild I was in during the beta test. I should have been in the official release too. I, alone, was saved because they spotted my disease… but actually, that had always, always hurt me. If… if I could enter Aincrad, even now, I could use what life I had left for everyone's sake; I've always thought so. If I could… I may have been able to leave behind a purpose that I lived for……"

"……Merida…"

Yuuki took a step forward as she called her name. However, Merida violently shook her head while retreating. Her scattered tear drops gleamed golden as the sunlight reflected off them.

"…Please, Yuuki, Ran. Let me go to Aincrad. There are SAO victims in this hospital as well, so I can pass the IP address filter. My parents may become sad, but I think they will understand. I… I want to find one. A purpose for being born into this world…!"

Her fervent monologue suffused into the breeze crossing the grassy plains and dispersed into the virtual atmosphere.

Merida said the same on the day they first met. And once again, Yuuki could find no words in return. She wanted to find a purpose for her life—Yuuki, too, hid that wish within herself.

Yuuki stood still and Ran advanced from her side without a sound.

She slowly crouched down and gently scooped Roy up from the insect cage with her left hand. Softly caressing the glossy forewings of the stag beetle that stayed meekly on her palm, she calmly spoke up.

"There are many, many reasons for you to live on here in Serene Garden, in Asuka Empire, and in the real world too. You were the one who raised Roy up so splendidly, and you were the one who brought Yuu and me to that new world. I know you will find many more in the future as well."

"……"

Merida stared hard at Ran and the stag beetle on her palm with her two eyes brimming with large tears.

Her mouth formed a faint smile before soon—and the slightly older girl spoke.

"It would make me very happy if the both of you felt like you've gotten anything from me. But… what I truly want cannot be found here, in Asuka, or even in the real world. I… want to fight. I don't want to just wait for my end on a hospital bed… I want to fight against something bigger than illness… like fate, or the world, and have my life burn out at the end of that. So… please, Ran. Let me go."

"……Merida……"

Yuuki knew upon hearing her elder sister's whisper.

Ran… Aiko possessed an «empathy» far stronger than Yuuki did. She had the strength to accompany them through their suffering and anguish, to understand them, and to accept them—

As such, Ran could sympathize even with Merida's current sentiments. She would be swayed into wanting to grant her wishes.

But.

——But.

If she let Merida go here, Ran would most certainly suffer far worse afterwards. She would regret her words, her choices, and be forced to continue shouldering an unredeemable sin.

So, Yuuki had to open her mouth now. She could not leave everything to her elder sister like always; she had to make Merida give up with her own words and intent.

Gripping her two hands tightly enough to shake her very core, Yuuki shouted.

"……Merida!!"

Firmly catching onto those two emerald eyes that blinked in shock at her sudden cry, she shouted once more.

"Then I'll find it for you! I'll find a purpose for you to burn your life out on! So… so, don't go, Merida!!"

Hearing those words, Merida blinked again and showed a hazy smile.

"……How will you find that for me, Yuuki?"

Yuuki did not understand why she replied so to that quiet question. But those words had the power to sway even her own fate.

"Fight me in Asuka Empire, Merida. You will surely understand after that."

7

There was no assurance Merida, returning the insect cage with Roy inside to her inventory and logging out from Serene Garden for the moment, would dive into Asuka Empire instead of Sword Art Online as Yuuki wanted.

Still, Yuuki believed in her and continued waiting at their meeting place, the towering, large cedar on the outskirts of the capital, Kiyomihara.

The surrounding grasslands appeared vaguely like Teal Hills. However, zebra grass, absent from Serene Garden, grew everywhere just a short distance away and stirred in the cold wind.

Yuuki turned around upon hearing the light pattering she had grown used to after several minutes passed.

The ninja was clad in that familiar bright green outfit but unlike always, she wore a mask concealing most of her face from the very beginning. Lowering her running speed, she stood around five meters from Yuuki and Ran before turning a silent gaze at them.

"……Merida…"

Thank you for coming; those words never left Yuuki despite her desire to say them. The pointed, keen air emanating from all of Merida descended upon her as an unseen pressure.

Yuuki still had no experience in so-called «Duels». She naturally knew such a system existed and watched the duels on amicable terms between fellow guild members throughout town, but she had a strong sense of aversion towards seriously fighting a player, the embodiment of a human of flesh and blood.

But this duel was requested by Yuuki herself.

Merida had tried going to SAO in pursuit of something worthy of burning her life away for. That was likely something that existed for real

despite found in virtual worlds. A truth in virtual worlds that allowed her to move like other players despite her body burdened with grave illness.

In SAO which had turned into a death game, many players fought between the boundaries of true life and death. Yuuki could somewhat understood Merida's desire to fight for her old comrades… or perhaps all of the survivors even if it meant her self-imposed imprisonment in that death game after experiencing the beta test.

But simultaneously, she felt that awfully flawed. Was it not Merida's fate to be saved from SAO with her illness spotted?

She must have more she could do here, too, in this world. Though Yuuki did not know what those could be, she knew they existed. She would deliver her thoughts not by words but by fighting.

Taking the time to expel the air gathered in her lungs, Yuuki sucked in the cold wind of the virtual world and opened the menu with a wave of her right hand.

She touched the «Duel» duel for the very first time. A list of players within range for her to challenge came out, so she selected Merida's name and pressed the OK button.

Merida, who was watching Yuuki in silence up until now, turned her sight downwards. Lifting her right arm, she touched the window she alone could see. The message, [Your duel invitation has been accepted.], scrolled into Yuuki's window and disappeared along with it.

A countdown of thirty seconds started in the halfway point between the pair. Yuuki drew the katana on her left waist with her sweaty right hand. Ink Flow
Named «Suminagashi», categorized as an «uchigatana». A black Damascus pattern surfaced on the easy-to-use blade that was not all too rare.

Merida drew her cherished katana a moment slower. Named « Scarlet Moon
Akezuki», categorized as a «shinobi katana». Though the rare weapon

with a dark scarlet straight blade was considerably smaller than Yuuki's katana, it won in terms of overall specifications.

Yuuki felt something compress deep in her chest the moment that shinobi katana's sharp point was directed at her.

She could not possibly avoid all of Merida's attacks as a nimble ninja. That weapon would thrust into Yuuki's body before long and tear it apart. And Yuuki, too, had to cut her precious friend, Merida, with her own katana. They would feel no pain in this virtual world and all that hung on the balance were trifling lives determined by numerals, but still, this was a true «fight».

Could she do it? Could she fight against Merida properly in her first ever duel against another?

"……"

With her body shivering against her will, Yuuki's back fell behind—

And was gently pushed back with Ran's voice as she watched on several meters away.

—It will be okay.

—Your feelings will reach her. Yuu, you only need to face her earnestly.

"……Nee-chan…"

Her shivering settled down the instant she muttered in her mouth.

The chances of Ran winning this duel were higher than Yuuki if she participated. As a miko capable of both manipulating a variety of precise charm arts and close range combat via a striking weapon, «oonusa», as well, Ran's prowess in battle was clearly above Yuuki's. Though Merida's character level was naturally higher than Ran's, status points did not increase by much in accordance to one's level in Asuka Empire.

Still, even if she relied on her elder sister like always and won this duel now, Merida would never receive Yuuki's thoughts.

Yes—she would receive them. All of the emotions and thoughts residing within Yuuki.

Yuuki stared straight towards the countdown's numerical display, counting down the remaining five seconds as it glowed bright; *four*, *three*, *two*, *one*.

Zero scattered as a ring of light and vanished.

"Ii… yaaaaahh!!"

Yelling her spirit out, Yuuki kicked off the ground.

Though the quickness of a samurai's motions lost to that of a ninja, they excelled solely in the force they put into charging in for their slashes. Closing in the five meters gap with a single leap, she swung her katana down from its raised position at Merida who stood straight.

But.

Her two arms unconsciously turned rigid the moment she saw those same green eyes from Serene Garden beyond the mask. The ink black blade shook the slightest bit and tilted her trajectory towards the right. That deviation would have been no issue on a monster, but a seasoned player like Merida would never miss it.

The air hissed and Merida dodged to the left at a speed close to teleportation. Yuuki's slash cut no more than empty air and its pale light effect dispersed.

A violent shock assailed her left shoulder immediately after. Yuuki was helplessly blown away and rolled across the ground. Catching sight of her LP bar reducing by nearly ten percent in a corner of her vision, she continued rolling with the momentum instead of resisting it and stood up after gaining some distance.

What Yuuki saw after readying her sword once more was Merida with her left palm thrust out instead of the shinobi katana in her right hand.

Ninja were capable of martial arts skills, but Yuuki's breath stopped nonetheless upon understanding that single attack had taken ten percent of her bar despite it being barehanded and passing through the spaulder guarding her shoulder.

She knew beforehand, but she certainly was—strong.

No, she only thought she knew. Merida had always focused on supporting Yuuki and Ran thus far when they played. By personally dealing as little damage as possible to monsters, she would let the pair earn a bigger portion of the experience points distribution.

She had seen only a mere fragment of Merida's real power. While frozen at that fact, unable to pull off another attack, a quiet voice reached Yuuki.

"…I was like that at first too."

The mouth below the mask showed a slight smile.

"The first time I dueled a player during the SAO beta test, my arms would shrink away and my attacks wouldn't hit at all. It's not like attacking a character on a monitor, after all. Even if your mind understands that's not a real human body but just an avatar, your body wouldn't go along with it… It took two weeks before I could handle duels properly because of that."

"…How were you able to fight?"

Yuuki unwittingly asked the ninja she faced off. Merida looked up towards the cloud skies at that while she murmured.

"…This was what that fellow one-handed sword user told me when we fought. Duels aren't just attempts to kill each other; something can be conveyed by crossing swords. That was no different in the old online games, in VRMMOs, or even in sports events in the real world… apparently. So, I was actually a little surprised when you told me to 'fight' earlier."

Yes—Yuuki did have something to convey to Merida. Something she could not deliver as fluent words, an emotion churning hot in the pit of her chest. She requested a duel with Merida only because she thought she could convey it through their swords.

She would convey nothing if her arms remained drawn away from the beginning. She had to surpass her fear and hesitation, and step forth. Advance, forward, stopping for nothing… until she neared Merida's heart.

"…She won't get anything unless I crash into her, will she?"

As though she heard what Yuuki softly said to herself, Merida nodded as well. Twirling the shinobi katana in her right hand into a reverse grip, she readied it slanted before her body. In return, Yuuki raised her uchigatana yet again.

Merida moved first this time.

She leaned low, forward, and the bright green gust charged in from the front. She likely stopped holding back. That ultra-fast attack slash with the shinobi katana had to be guarded against or avoided somehow, and that had to follow into a counterattack. It happened then, when her gaze fell upon the scarlet blade dimly reflecting the sunlight.

—Watch all of Merida, not just her katana, Yuu!

Yuuki felt like she heard that from behind. Her eyes grew wide in that moment and expanded her focused vision.

Merida's right hand wielded the shinobi katana before herself. Though it was difficult to watch her left hand, hidden in the katana's shadow, there was certainly a glint from something held in that fist.

—The katana's a distraction. Her first strike will be from her left hand… a shuriken!

In the very instant Merida's left hand blurred, Yuuki turned her eyes towards that glint she briefly caught and swung down the sword she held with both hands.

Kiin! A shrill, metallic noise echoed and sparks scattered. The cross-shaped shuriken repelled by Yuuki's katana spun as it sprung back towards Merida. That was the effect of the skill unique to samurai, «Return Blow».

"…!"

The ninja let a short breath leak and the shuriken was deflected again with the shinobi katana in her right hand. Taking her attention off the

glint that disappeared upwards, towards the right, Yuuki stepped in with all she had towards Merida whose guard was down.

The distance was fine. She would hesitate no longer.

She did not cut down for victory, hatred, or bloodlust. She swung her sword to show Merida the technique she had forged into her… and what laid beyond that.

"Uu… ryaaahh!!"

She turned her wrist, slashing up from below with a scream. The black edge was sucked towards Merida's bosom as she tried to gain some distance by jumping backwards despite her loss of balance.

Zashuu!! A heavy sense of resistance ran through her with that sound effect. A shaft of crimson light rose up high into the sky from Yuuki's katana, swung up high. The LP bar displayed above Merida's head dropped by roughly fifteen percent.

This would be the timing to open up the Ground Circle and activate a skill when up against a monster, to deal heavy damage. However, Merida would probably not show that much of an opening from receiving a single hit. The attack to follow up with would be a normal one—but with all of her might behind it.

She raised her precious katana up for the third time.

On the other hand, Merida utilized her position after taking an upward slash and somersaulted backwards.

Yuuki kicked off the ground with all her heart in order to make it in time for that instant of vulnerability that would be conceived when she lands.

"Haaa——!!"

Letting out a fervent roar, she dealt a strike with all her might.

Dann! The air rumbled.

Curled up in the air, Merida looked straight down at Yuuki and kicked off the empty air with her two feet. The skill unique to ninja, «Double Jump».

"Cheaahh!"

Merida charged in, fired up for the first time in this battle. The shinobi katana in her right hand drew towards Yuuki's throat as a flash of vermillion light.

Though Merida won in terms of slashing speed as a ninja, Yuuki was the first to move. Neither of the pair currently held an advantage of speed. However, if Yuuki were to lose herself to her fear and falter for the slightest moment, she would be countered with a heavy blow.

Yuuki had something to convey to Merida.

She would show her that she could become much stronger.

The world extended forever outside the confined death game, SAO. Both the virtual and real worlds still held many encounters, discoveries, and tales.

——I'll bring you to the end of the world.

——I'll find a new fate for you, Merida.

——So……!

"……——aaaa**aaaaahh**——!!"

A white light radiated out within Yuuki's vision. Glittering particles scattered like tiny stars from all over the avatar. The resistance put up by the air, compressed by the edge, heightened to its limit and the sensation of breaking through that came forth—

Yuuki's katana became a streaking flash of light and swung down within the absolute silence.

Merida's shinobi katana passed through behind while grazing the left side of her neck a tick later.

Yuuki stayed still with her katana still lowered. Right after sound returned to the world, a crimson damage effect spurt from the gash in her neck and her LP bar reduced, yet again, by over twenty percent.

She staggered as she turned about and there Merida was, petrified with her shinobi katana still swung out.

The ninja outfit abrupt tore from the left shoulder to the back and a vivid flood of light gushed from there. The remaining eighty-five percent of Merida's LP bar began to rapidly fall and stopped just as it went a little below fifty percent.

Dodon! Without warning, the sound of a drum rang out while a window announcing the end of the duel was displayed, causing Yuuki to let out a surprised "eeh". Her two widened eyes blinked multiple times, but the window undeniably wrote [Winner: Yuuki] in large letters.

"W-Why… it's not…"

She panicked and Merida, slowly getting up and turning about, returned the shinobi katana to its sheath on her waist as she spoke with a smile.

"In Asuka Empire, aside from the «Bout» mode, a fight to the death, there's also a «Match» mode that ends upon falling below half LP. I chose Match as the challenger, so the victory of this duel belongs all to you, Yuuki. …Congratulations, you were really strong. I was shocked."

"…E-Erm…"

With the issue sidestepped despite her just getting started, Yuuki stood frozen in a daze.

It appeared she won the duel. But she did not know if Merida got her thoughts from just that. Merida's standing figure with her gentle smile on still seemed volatile enough to dissolve away under the sunlight any

moment now and Yuuki unconsciously opened her mouth, forgetting to even keep her katana.

"…If I really was strong, that's thanks to you, Merida. It's because you taught me so much that I got strong. I said I would find something to burn your life out on, didn't I, Merida? I still don't know what that could be… but I promise. I will become stronger and bring you along any and everywhere… no matter how far……"

Though she managed to put what she felt during the battle into words, her voice cut off there. Turning towards Yuuki who was still searching for the correct words, taking in breath after breath—

Merida lowered the mask on her face and showed a grin. That smile was exactly the same as when they first met in Serene Garden.

"I got it, Yuuki."

"Eh……"

"Your feelings reached me through our swords, Yuuki. It wasn't just your feelings regarding me… but a whole, whole lot more than that too. Erm… I'm not all that smart, so I'm not sure how to say this. Yuuki, your strength… no, that's not all, erm…"

This time, Merida mumbled as she searched for the correct words.

"…Potential."

Both Merida and Yuuki turned their sight at that quiet voice.

The voice belonged to Ran who had watched the pair's duel from under the large cedar tree. Showing her usual gentle smile, the miko glided closer to the pair and stated once more.

"Her potential, isn't it, Merida?"

"Right, that!"

Snapping her fingers, Merida nodded time after time.

"There are lots and lots packed in you, Yuuki. Your strength during the duel was just one part of that… Yuuki, you'll become more and more strong and impressive from now on. So much that someday, everyone in all kinds of worlds would know of your name."

"……No way… I couldn't possibly…"

Yuuki stared fixedly at Merida's face even as she mumbled.

Her brooding expression was no longer there. However, the fragility seemed to remain.

Did Merida give up on going to SAO, or did her determination remain? It happened then, when Yuuki resolved herself to ask.

Ran who stood on her immediate right placed her face on Yuuki's shoulder as she verbalized something unexpected.

"Merida, Yuuki. I've been thinking lately."

"…About what, Ran?"

"You see, I want to start a guild with the three of us. And then, I want us to make more comrades… more friends, bit by bit, and expand this small circle of ours."

Saying so, Ran held Yuuki's right hand with her left. Following that, she turned to Merida who stood a distance away and extended her right hand straight out.

Unconsciously, Yuuki also offered her left hand towards Merida.

Looking down at the two hands, Merida replied with slight hesitance on her face.

"But, Ran… we…"

Yes. That was Yuuki's concern as well.

The trio who met at a VR hospice shared the common trait of fighting against severe illness. Even if they created a guild in Asuka Empire and new members joined, they could not possibly keep their sickness under wraps forever. They would have to explain it someday. Or perhaps, before that—they could be torn apart by force.

The closer they become as guild members, the more painful it would be on both sides. It would be perfectly plausible for the guild to split based on that. Ran, too, should understand that.

"……It would be nice if this circle could expand out without limit someday, overcoming our illnesses… I do think that, but……"

Ran's voice started at almost a whisper, but then continued on with strength.

"I was thinking of first inviting those in situations similar to us. I believe there are still many more like us in Serene Garden who want to see the worlds outside, to go farther. I want to invite them into the guild and together, we will go as far as the virtual world reaches. Like what you did, Merida, when you held Yuu and my hands, and pulled us along."

Still her right hand still stretched out without the slightest quiver, Ran finished her words.

Merida widened her eyes from slight surprise and silently stared at Ran.

A wind blew and the countless leaves on the giant cedar rustled. No trace remained of the duel on the grass. Scattered, wispy cloud quietly flowed through the sky of a slightly different shade of blue from Serene Garden. A falcon smoothly circled somewhere far above.

It seemed Asuka Empire's world map, centered on the Kinki region, currently ended at Mount Fuji in the east and the Kanmon Straits in the west—though their in-game names were naturally different. However, there were rumors that the next update would add the Kanto and Kyushu regions. This world would continue expanding, and so would other VRMMOs such as ALfheim Online.

—We will find it for sure, Merida.

—The place we should be. The people we should meet. And, a fate worthy to burn your life out on.

Stretching out her left hand to its full length, Yuuki spoke earnestly in her heart.

Eventually—

Merida's emerald eyes quivered like on water. Pristine light turned into drops and streamed down her cheeks.

Her tears, which alone had the exact same hue as its counterpart in Serene Garden, silently spilled and Merida replied hoarsely.

"……I give up, already…… if you were to tell me all that…… how could I possibly leave you two behind……"

Her right foot, covered in a *tabi*, stomped on the ground numerous times before she stepped forward with her mind apparently made up.

One step, two, three… Merida reached the pair with slow but resolved steps and lifted her hands before holding Ran's right hand and Yuuki's left hand. Strongly and firmly.

"…This really is a small circle, isn't it?"

Yuuki put as much strength as she could into the hand holding Merida's in return after she said so with a face on the boundary between shedding tears and smiling.

"But it's much, much larger than one made by nee-chan and me alone."

Tears flowed from Yuuki's eyes the moment she showed a smile. She could not use either hand even if she wanted to wipe them away, so she could only let her tears fall in drops like some child; even in her vision, warped iridescent, she could recognize the smile on Merida growing larger.

"Aha… Yuuki, that's one amazing face. If you cry that much, you'll end up crying in the real world too."

"Who cares. I'm just that happy."

She desperately tried to shake off the virtual tears by blinking alone and Ran let go of Yuuki's hand for a moment and wiped her face with the sleeve of her miko outfit.

"You're the same old crybaby even after growing so strong, aren't you, Yuu?"

Something glistened on her elder sister's cheeks, too, while she spoke. Upon grasping Ran's hand once more, Yuuki looked up towards the skies.

The falcon earlier had already flown off elsewhere, but the sky was as beautiful as ever. It seemed connected to both Serene Garden and the real world too.

They would go. Hand-in-hand, no matter how far. For the worlds they would someday arrive at, for those they would someday meet.

Yuuki felt the door, closed ever since she was forced to transfer school in her fourth year of elementary school against her will, gradually open.

She did not know how much time she had left. But if her life was to be shorter than others, she would only need to run on accordingly, at a faster rate, with a larger stride. She could only lie down on a bed in the real world, but the virtual world stretched out without boundaries.

"…We should return soon."

Merida was the one who spoke. As though to dispel Yuuki and Ran's anxiety, she tightened her grip once more at the end before releasing it.

"I told mama that I would be back at the cafe by two. ……Yuuki, Ran, I am truly sorry for making you go through such horrible things on your birthdays."

Merida bowed her head down deeply and Ran firmly held onto her shoulder.

"You don't have to apologize, Merida. It was a very, very lovely birthday. I mean, you even came to visit us, Merida."

Yuuki shouted just as she heard those words.

"I… I was also really happy! So… so, Merida, meet me on the other side too!"

Nodding at Ran who turned about in surprise, she continued speaking.

"Erm, you see, I'm in a cleanroom due to some circumstances, but we can meet through the glass from the adjacent monitoring room, so… we can't hold hands, but still, I want to meet you, Merida."

She did not know if Doctor Kurahashi would approve of the meeting, even if it was through the glass, due to the confidentiality issues related to the Medicuboid. But she had the feeling he would not say no. After all, it was her fourteenth birthday.

"……Right! I'll go meet you right after getting back, Yuuki!"

By the time Merida nodded vigorously, the fragility was already gone from her face without a trace.

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[Yuuki-kun, are you ready?]

Upon replying "Go ahead!" to Doctor Kurahashi's voice from the speakers, the switchable glass isolating the cleanroom and monitoring room took no time at all to transit to transparency.

In the room practically as narrow as a corridor, Doctor Kurahashi was there wearing a white coat instead of the usual cleanroom suit along with Ran in her pajamas and a girl sitting on a wheelchair who appeared slightly older.

"…Happy birthday, Yuuki!"

Merida's voice, which she heard for the first time in the real world, was a little more hoarse than in the virtual world. Her face was thin under her light green knit cap and her skin was bluish too. Still, a strong, gleaming light resided in her large eyes.

"Thanks… thanks, Merida."

Though she was forbade from touching the glass, Yuuki approached as close as she could while replying. Merida, too, moved the wheelchair several tens of centimeters forward at that and smiled with her face practically touching the thick switchable glass.

[Ran, Yuuki, you both really resemble yourselves on the other side. …I'm sorry, I wanted to bring along flowers for both of you, but I was told that I can't go in there.]

A bouquet certainly sat on Merida's lap as she mentioned.

"It's fine, it's fine, seeing it like this is enough for me! It's really beautiful… thank you very much, Merida!"

[Erm… Yuuki, and you too, Ran. Instead of a present, I'll promise the both of you something. That'll be the last time… I ever say I want to go to that world. This is proof of that.]

Merida, who lifted her left hand, pinched something thin and rectangular in her right hand—a memory card.

Yuuki's eyes clearly saw the logo noted on the label in letters smaller than rice grains.

Sword Art Online.

Merida's lips moved slightly as her eyes shut. Though the microphone did not pick it up, Yuuki's ears caught a distinct "good bye".

Merida put strength into her fingers and they twitched—the memory card broke into two with a quiet noise before long.

The forced removal of the victims' Nerve Gears in the SAO incident drafted by the National Police Agency was left unexecuted in the end. Before preparations for the plan were in order, the game was cleared and the approximately six thousand survivors returned to the real world.

Yuuki's and Ran's fourteenth birthdays were roughly half a year before that. And so was the creation date of the guild, «Sleeping Knights».

(End)

Notes

"…three months after SAO…" + "nine months after she turned twelve, nine months" – The initial is Feb 2023, while the latter is Feb 2024. The latter is probably the correct one, so she should be twelve here and thirteen later.

"Royton" – The *ton* as in "Royton" is the same reading as "pork" in Japanese. Floating bits in soup probably refers to crou*ton*s.

"Akuro Ou" – Refers to the head of the *Emishi* at the start of the *Heian* period. They are usually akin to the bosses of robbers or made into *oni* in literature.

"Hush, Little Baby" – The verse was corrected from the original text below:

So hush little baby, don't you cry,
Daddy lover you and so do I.
Daddy lover you and so do I.